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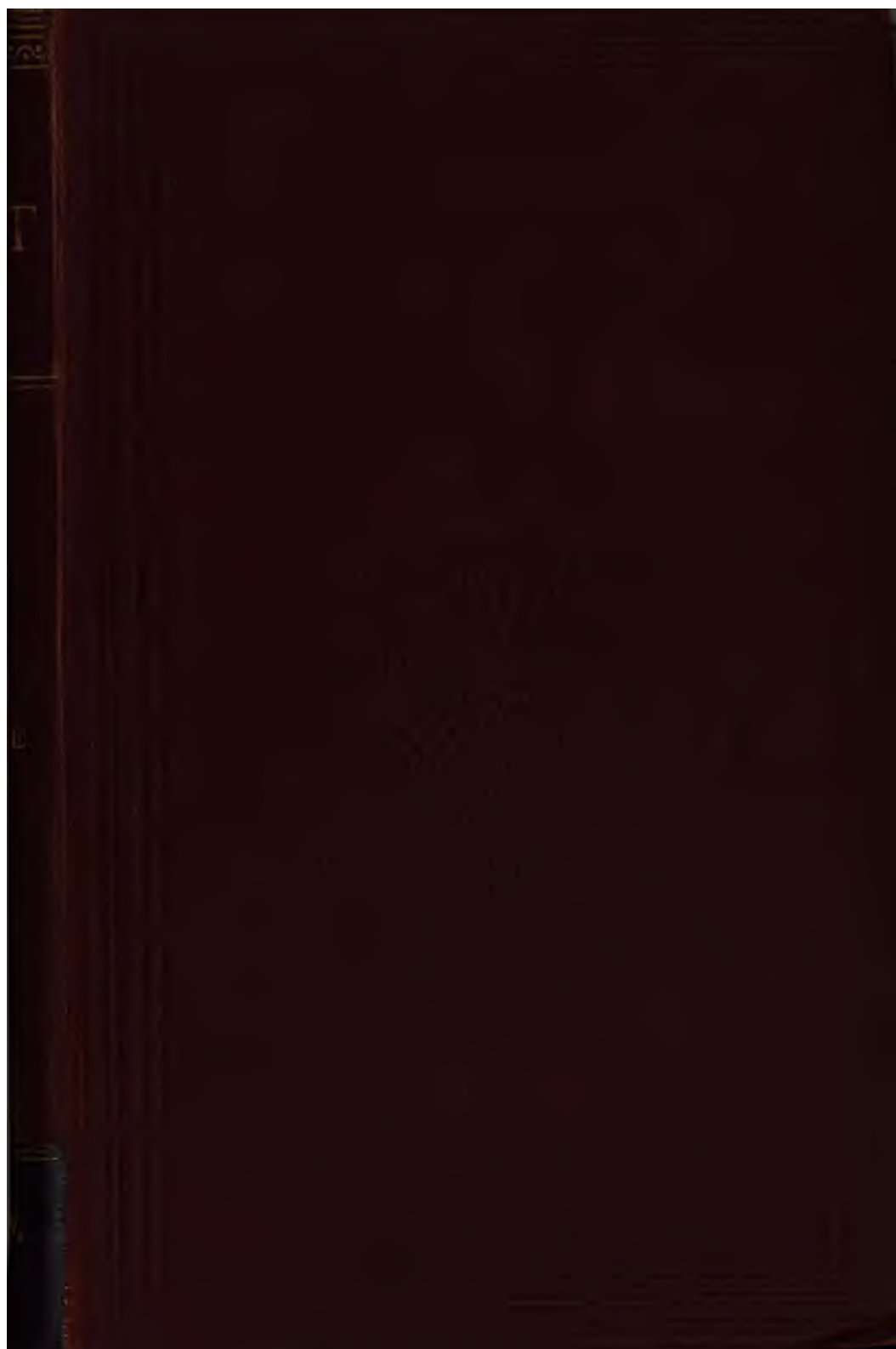
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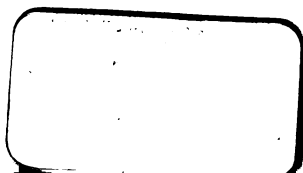
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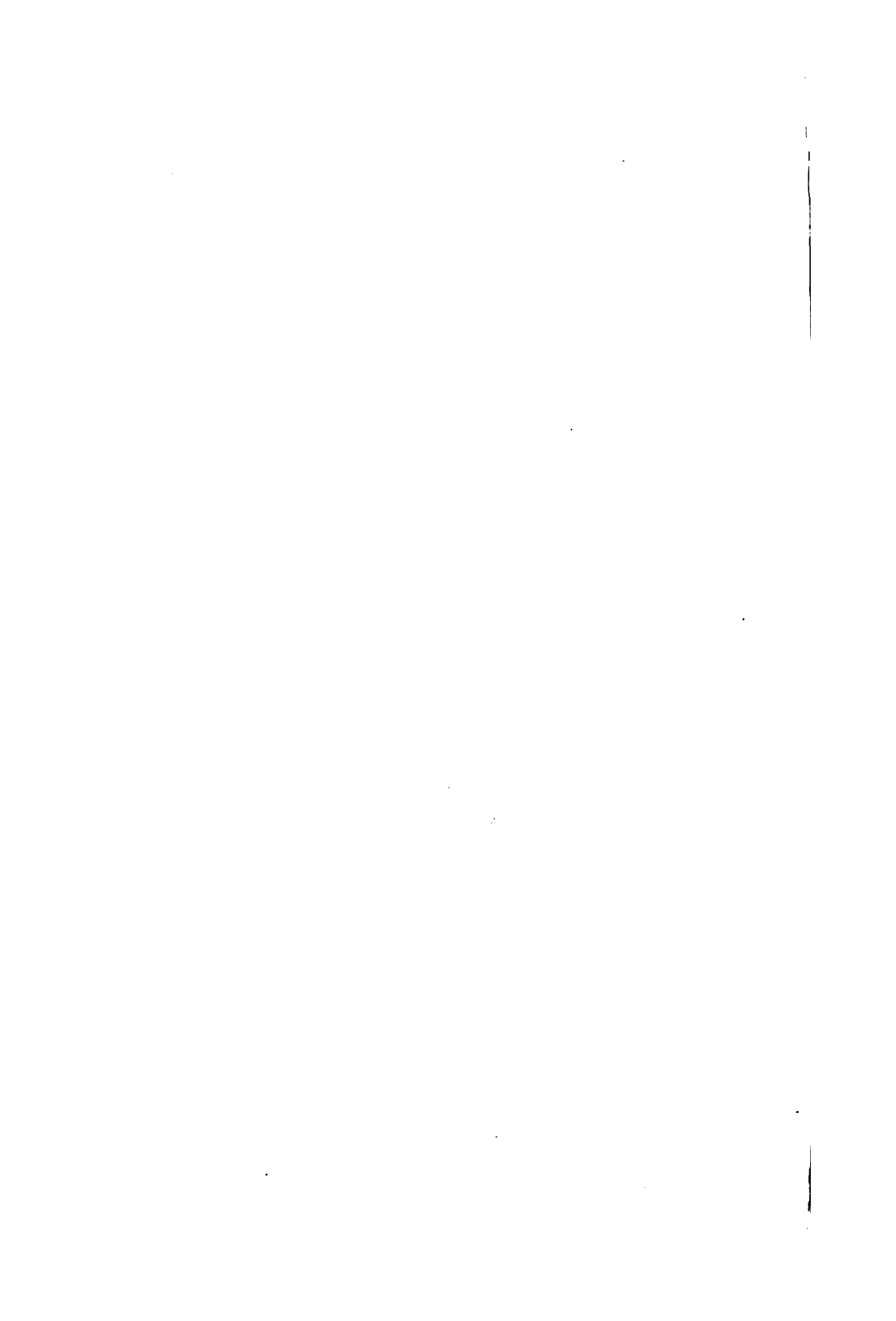
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CUT ADrift.

A Novel.

BY

ALBANY FONBLANQUE,

AUTHOR OF "A TANGLED SKEIN."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:

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CUT ADRIFT.

CHAPTER I.

PAY DAY.

AMONGST Jack Hill's numerous faults, he did not count that of early rising. The professed early riser is to me a bore of the first magnitude. The manner in which he blusters into your room with his loud "haw haw! what not up *yet*?" is to me most offensive, particularly when I know that he is going to be as stupid as an owl at three o'clock, and that he will be snoring just when sensible people are beginning to enjoy themselves. When he makes his insulting observations about the things he has done, the miles he has walked and all the rest of it before breakfast, I tell him that the pigs and the dickey birds were awake first; and as I can generally shut him up with such an argument as *that*, I have my own opinion as to the value of what he has done in those early hours, and can do in the later part of the day.

Bed—when you wake after a good night's

rest, and find that you need not turn out just yet—is a peaceful and a sacred place. I believe that more kind thoughts have been engendered, more nasty little selfishnesses conquered, more good resolves taken, and more bad ideas corrected in beds than in pews, no matter what pulpit they be under. What a noble feeling of peace and universal philanthropy comes over one when we awake, and looking at our watch expecting that it is eight o'clock, find that it is only six? Two hours more of thee, oh, silent counsellor! oh, shrine of peaceful reflection!! oh, bed!!! for you require no adjective to express thy worth, thy charms. I revere the memory of that retired officer who made his servant call him every morning at first bugle time, that he might have the luxury of turning over and bidding the first bugle go and be so-and-so'd. May the graves of all first and other bugles, all first and other bells, and of all other diabolical contrivances for tearing a rational being from the rational enjoyment of his BED (capitals, if you please, good printer) be defiled! Inshallah! I have said it.

Jack Hill lay in bed the morning after Mrs. Willerton's ball, not like some others with the echo of the music in his ears, or the dazzle of the lights in his eye, or that peculiar *buzz* which the lobster-salad, (the cham-

pagne, as it is well known, never has that effect) sometimes produces in his ears. He lay calmly thinking of stately but gentle Mary Aylwarde, of happy Constance Conway in her first ball dress, well satisfied with himself for the resolve he had made to seek such society for the future. It seemed strange to him that he could not see separately in his mind's eye those two persons who filled his thoughts. The one had become the medium, the air, the light, the cleft in the clouds, through which the other became apparent. Through Mary Aylwarde, purified and strengthened in their passage, flew his thoughts to the pale girl who had sprained her wrist at Southerton, who was so sad, but could be made so joyous by a touch of kindness. Her great lustrous eyes, now filled with unchildlike gravity, now brimming over with more than childish glee, haunted him. Her strange choice of subjects for conversation puzzled him. He concluded that she was a very queer girl—a very queer girl, indeed, and then he began to think her over again.

Well, pay day had arrived at last. Pay day on which he was to settle all those harrasing little debts, on which he had begun to reflect with a feeling of shame—time had been when he thought it rather a good joke to be

dunned. Pay day on which he was to pay to the better part of himself a debt too long unremembered.

He collected his bills; sorted and docketed them, taking great delight in being strictly business-like, and found that thirty-two pounds fifteen would satisfy all the small and pressing claims. Tailors and some other long-suffering tradesmen who had not troubled him, could be put off till next quarter. This would leave him seventeen pounds five out of his expected fifty to live upon for the next three months, and "Hang it!" he said, half aloud, "with what I can earn by writing, even if I only get two pounds a week, I shall do very well; and if I put by thirty out of the next two quarters, I shall be a free man." He felt like a free man as he rose. Young, clever, in earnest, with health on his side, and a small but certain income as a support against accidents—what had he to fear?

Punctual as the clock struck three, Mr. Blisset entered with a large letter in his hand. Notwithstanding all his good resolves, Jack eyed that letter askance.

"More jawing and tracts," he thought. He was ready enough to listen to good advice from such lips as those of pleasant Gertrude Clair, or of his old friend Bloxam,

but Jabez Standring had not a nice way of lecturing. He flung his good advice at your head, or scrubbed you with it, as dirty brats are scrubbed in workhouses.

Now Blisset was no friend of Jack's, Jack knew too much about him; but being in a good humour with himself and all the world, he opened his last bottle of sherry for his visitor, gave him a cigar, and when he had rested, said gaily—

“Now then, old fellow, where's the money?”

“I have only this letter for you,” replied Blisset, handing it.

“No chaffing, Blisset! you know you always bring me fifty pounds,” said Jack.

“Certainly, when they have been given me to bring.”

“Perhaps the notes are in the letter,” said Jack, taking it up from where he had tossed it aside.

“You had better open it and see,” replied Jabez Standring's messenger. “I give it you as it was given to me,” and he sipped his wine with the air of a man who had done his work, and earned the refreshment.

Jack tore open the envelope, his fingers trembling a little as he did so. Then came out a large blue sheet all over lines and figures, and entries in a small, cramped

hand, a note in Jabez Standring's handwriting—but no money!

A cold, sickly feeling stole over Jack Hill. He was struck at once by the idea that he was wronged, but the truth was as far from his mind as Norway is from Timbuctoo.

"Don't play the fool, Blisset!" he said, sternly. "I am not in a humour for humbug!"

"Nor I neither," replied the other, rising. "I have something else to do than to stop chattering here!"

"But the money—my money—my dividends, or whatever they are?" began Jack, turning very pale.

"If you want to know about your affairs, why the deuce don't you read your man-of-business' letter? *I'm* not your trustee, or your guardian! What's the good of talking to me?" said Blisset.

Jack read it. Read it? It swam before his eyes; the words danced at him, jeered at him, mocked him, wove themselves—plainly as they were written—into unintelligible jumbles! Blisset had left him alone full half an hour before he could realise their import.

This was the letter:—

"3a, Austin Friars.

"Mr. John Hill,

"Sir,—Our connection with you having

ceased yesterday, we now beg to hand you, through our Mr. Blisset, your account, which we trust you will find correct, and pass in conformity.

“ You will perceive that after retaining the sum of £58 (say fifty-eight pounds), being the last instalment due to Messrs. Spice and Corkage of Oxford, under the arrangement made on your behalf with that firm, dated 21st September, 1862; the balance to your debt is nineteen and fourpence, which we shall be glad to receive at your earliest convenience.

“ We are, your’s truly,

“ *pro* HODD, STANDRING AND MASTERS,

“ JABEZ STANDRING.”

The clue to this bewildering epistle lay in the big sheet of blue paper all over figures. You might as well have asked poor bewildered Jack to square the circle, or discover the philosopher’s stone off hand, to make head or tail of it. The only entry that he could understand—the entry that like a jibbering imp took up all the others and played cat’s-cradle with them—was that of the miserable nineteen and fourpence *balance against him*.

He was certainly in no humour to be humbugged. He thrust the letter and account into his pocket, and strode off to Austin Friars to demand an explanation.

He sent in his name, and was told that Mr. Standring would see him in a few minutes. Perhaps he was not wholly unexpected.

Jabez Standring has aged considerably since last we saw him lecturing his family upon the crimes of the then delinquent (because poor) and now flourishing Bloxam—but changed? No! His hair was more grey, his face paler except where the scar (the infliction of which the Earl of Hilton, sometime Bertram Aylwarde, was to rue all his life) gleams red and fiery. He had been a cold, calculating, passionless man at twenty; he was only a little more cold, and calculating, and passionless at sixty-eight. The wound which caused the scar had cut a nerve, which having healed imperfectly, caused the whole of his left cheek to twitch in those rare cases when he became angry, or agitated. It twitched violently now, and the scar blazed out like a blood stain on the snow, as Jack Hill spread before him the letter he had just received and asked him—a little too haughtily—what it meant.

“I had hoped,” he said, “that your account, which has been prepared with care, would have explained itself, but perhaps, you do not understand accounts?” replied the merchant.

“I don’t indeed, such accounts as that. I am entitled to two hundred a year, Mr.

Standring, and granted that you are right in deducting fifty-eight pounds for any Oxford debts, and that I owe you those few shillings, I cannot understand what you mean by sending in your account now, and saying that our connection is at an end."

"Our connection ceased with your annuity."

"My annuity!"

"Have I not made myself clear?"

"Certainly not; an annuity is for life—"

"Sometimes; but your's was for a term of years which concluded yesterday."

"Then in God's name, why was I not told so?" cried Jack aghast.

"You have been told so repeatedly during the last two years, and urged to provide for the future, by entering some profession or business," replied Jabez Standring in his coldest, and most measured tones.

"Never, never!" ejaculated Hill.

Jabez Standring made no reply, but whistled down the pipe which communicated with the clerks' office. "Bring me," he said, when the signal of attention was given, "bring me my letters to Mr. Hill."

Jack's conscience smote him.

"If you are going to refer me to your later letters," he said somewhat embarrassed, "I can save you the trouble of sending for

the book. I admit that I never read them."

"*You never read my letters?*" returned Jabez Standring in amaze, the scar blazing anew, and the cheek twitching violently. "Do I understand you aright, young man, that you have not read my letters sent to you every quarter by a trusty messenger with your—your money?"

"I read some of them; enough to make me not care to read any more," answered Jack, looking his quondam guardian full in the face, with an honest resolute look that made even those cold grey eyes fall before it. "You chose, Mr. Standring, to leave me when a child entirely to my own devices, and you chose to assume that those devices would be merely wicked, or at least unworthy. Whose fault would it have been if they were so? You have, as I suppose, taken good care of my money. You dared not do otherwise. But what care have you taken of me? You cast me adrift upon the world, and wrote me letters! Letters encouraging me to do well? No. A young pickpocket in a reformatory would have hated you for such letters as you heaped on me—on me—born a gentleman; educated, by your own arrangements, amongst gentlemen; and having—I should have been worse than you made me out to be if I had not—some gentlemanly

feelings. Of course I lit my pipe with your letters unread, when I learned what to expect from their contents."

"Have you anything more to say to me," asked Jabez Standring.

"More? I have said nothing yet, compared to what I shall have to say if you do not give me a satisfactory explanation of this," and Jack, who I am sorry to say was losing his temper—a very good thing to keep when you were in controversy with Jabez Standring—slapped his hand upon the table with a bang that made the table shake.

"You shall have it," replied Jabez Standring utterly unmoved. "The charge of your affairs, Mr. Hill, was forced upon me. I did not seek it. Your mother was a sort of connection, a very distant one, of my family. Your father was an acquaintance, and not an intimate one. We are anything but friends. He chose to ridicule the system under which I was brought up, and in which I brought up my son, and jeered me when in one instance (here the scar blazed forth again) it failed—as all good systems must do sometimes. *His* theory was that a boy should be left to himself amongst boys—that a young man should be left to himself amongst young men, to become what he was pleased to call a 'man of honour.' What was I to do with his son

when he came into my hands? Rear him under the system which his father despised? No. After a long struggle with my conscience, which thoroughly condemned such notions, I concluded that my worldly duty—standing towards you, as I did, in the place of a parent—was to act as your parent himself would have done, and that my duty as a Christian was to warn you of the evils with which his chosen system of education was fraught. I have performed both duties, Mr. Hill.

“Now as to your fortune,” continued the merchant. “It was your father’s theory that having given a young man a good education—by which he meant an education begun at a public school and finished at an university—he was sufficiently provided for. Do you follow me? The interest of the sum placed at my disposal for you would not nearly produce the necessary funds for so costly a preparation. I, therefore, purchased for you a terminable annuity of two hundred pounds. Whilst you were young, there was a balance every year in your favour, which, as you will see by your account, I employed for your profit; and had you been commonly prudent, there would have been a considerable surplus to be handed over to you now. But having an allowance of two hundred a year, you thought proper to spend as many thousand

pounds and more, during your residence at Oxford. Your debts more than exhausted the savings of former years, and now I am your creditor—for a very small sum, it is true, but still the balance is against you.

“I have a good memory, Mr. Hill, and remember that this time last year I wrote and warned you, as clearly as words could convey a warning, that in twelve months you would be, as far as I knew, penniless, and I entreated you to turn from the idle and vicious courses to which, to my sorrow, I heard you were addicted. You did not even read my letter. You chose to think that you possessed a capital which produced two hundred a year. Have you ever given yourself the trouble to calculate how much capital would be necessary, according to present rates of interest, to produce that sum? Have you ever made it your business to inquire into your own affairs? When you came of age, I wrote and requested you to do so. You did not favour me with any reply. And now, having neglected your own interests; having contemptuously rejected the advice and warnings of your trustee; having wasted your opportunities and squandered your resources, you come here, you raise your voice to me—to me who have discharged an onerous and ungrateful duty without the slightest

advantage to myself, you come here demanding explanations in the tone of an injured man. You forget yourself, Mr. Hill."

No! The good-for-nothing did not forget himself. He had done so perhaps, but as Jabez Standring delivered that terribly clear and unanswerable statement, his generous heart told him that he had only himself to blame. He did not forget himself, his better-self. He rose and said:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Standring. I have misjudged you. Shake hands and forget what I have said."

Standring bowed, but otherwise moved not, save in the scar which throbbed as though the wound were about to burst open afresh.

"Well, as you please," Jack resumed, somewhat vexed at the rejection of his friendly overtures. "I daresay I was abrupt at first. You wouldn't be very cool and polite I daresay, if you found yourself without a penny. Good day, Mr. Standring, you shall have your nineteen and fourpence to-morrow."

Standring returned to his desk and resumed his writing without a word, till Jack had left the room. Then he threw down his pen, and muttered between his closed teeth, "Now we shall see."

The broad shouldered, bright-eyed young

man who made his way from Clement's Inn to Austin Friars was followed by uncomplimentary remarks as he hurried along, crashing his way through the crowd, much as the big ball of the bowling alley crashes its way through the pins when you send it straight. The dejected young man who loitered back from Austin Friars to Clement's Inn in a half-dazed state, had many uncomplimentary remarks thrown back upon him. "Where was he going, stoo-pid? Why did he not get out of the way?" Like one who has just sustained a heavy fall, he felt numb and sick all over, and could not realise then where the greatest hurt lay. As he mounted his staircase, and saw his door besieged by the persons who had been told to come with their little bills receipted at five o'clock, it gave a great sting, and then he knew where it was. He had been musing sadly enough as he came along on his past—here was the present to provide for.

For a moment he hesitated; but that sharp sting had aroused him. He was a man of quick resolves, and they did not fail him now.

"You are before your time," he said, in as gay a tone as he could assume, as he passed through the assembled creditors and let himself in with his latch-key, "you must wait a bit whilst I go out and get change." He

entered his room, opened several drawers and boxes, and then went out again, shutting the outer door behind him.

The countenances of his expectant creditors fell as he sprang down the stairs. The excuse of going out to get change was not unknown in that locality, and Jack had closed the door of his chambers after him. Mr. Bates, the greengrocer, thought of his unpaid bill for cream, and declared it was too bad.

The stern Macphane, bitter as his own alum, sat himself down on the top step, and expressed his intention of remaining there till midnight, but he would have his money.

Mr. Clump's young man said he knew what he should do.

Mrs. Schlousher, the washerwoman, a lady of thirteen stone, who had come panting up the stairs a few moments after Jack's departure, on hearing of the state of affairs, exclaimed that it was just like him (Jack) and gasped of County Courts.

The others had each their fling. They all told each other that it was no use waiting, and recommended each other to go home and not waste their time—and still they all waited. They did not waste their time.

Up again bounded Jack, looking far more radiant than when he had gone out for "change," and the clink of gold and silver

in his pocket was music to the ears of his long-enduring creditors. One by one he called them in and paid them, having his little joke after his own manner with each. Even the crusty Macphane went away contented, growling "that gents like him (meaning Jack) was always careless, but they meant no harm."

In the midst of the proceedings entered Polly Secundus; but immediately retired to the bed-room, where she made belief to be very busy.

"Well, I am glad that's over, Mr. Hill," said the good dame, emerging as the door closed on the last satisfied dun. "It's quite a load off my mind."

"And off my pocket, Polly," laughed Jack. "I thought it was going to burst with the weight of my wealth as I came up the stairs; and just look here, Polly, sew me some buttons on the sleeves of my shirts, will you, like a dear old woman?"

"Lor, Mr. Hill, when you've all those beautiful gold links!"

"Gold links are vanity, Polly; besides they grind against your wrist and bother you. I have taken a fancy to buttons—twopence a dozen buttons. If you won't sew them on for me, I'll do it myself. I am not accustomed to needles and similar dangerous

implements. I shall inflict a dreadful wound on my thumb, lock jaw, tetanus, convulsions and death—coroner's inquest; beadle and paragraph in daily papers. Verdict of wilful murder against Polly Secundus. Home Secretary not to be moved. Last dying confession and speech of Polly. Oh, Polly! that I should live to buy your last dying speech and confession for a penny! But I forgot, I shall be dead of lock-jaw, and won't know anything about it. That would be a bore. Will you sew the buttons on, Polly, or will you not?"

She promised to do so, and Jack filled a pipe with his strongest tobacco and asked what o'clock it was.

Polly made towards his bed-room to consult his watch, saying she would go and see.

"You may go; but you won't see, Polly," he shouted after her.

"Don't it go, sir?" she asked.

Jack laughed.

"Go? it's gone."

"To be mended *again*, oh, Mr. Hill, how you do break your things."

"I won't break it any more, Polly," replied Jack in a lower and sadder tone, "It will be taken good care of now."

Do you see why Jack did not care any longer for gold sleeve links, and why he was

obliged to ask the time of day? His watch, his chain, his links, the rings he had worn in his dandy Oxford days, a silver cup that he had won in some regatta, every little trinket and valuable that he possessed had gone to get that "change" in which Macphane & Co. were paid. A potent alchemist in the Strand, over whose door hung the ancient arms of Lombardy, had changed the gold, the silver, and the gems into about a fifth of their value in prosaic pounds and shillings. Jack had five pounds left yet to pay Van Wyan; but he had to think it all over first.

CHAPTER II.

JACK THINKS IT OVER.

CORNELIUS VAN WYAN was a prim little gentleman, with a prim ready made little smile for all comers, and rather a wooden appearance. A sort of mitigated Punch; but entirely free from the vices which disfigure the character of that lawless, though amusing vagabond. Cornelius was propriety itself. He would no more have assaulted a beadle, or made a disturbance in the public street, than he would have appeared in Hyde Park without gloves. You know the appearance of a pair of boots that have been accustomed to be polished upon 'trees.' Well, Van Wyan had the appearance of a man who was accustomed to be treed up and polished all over. You would not find a wrinkle about him. His ideas were all treed up and polished, and the tree was always of the most fashionable shape.

Cornelius was an Irishman, and the worst offence you could give him was to tell him so. Literature provided his daily bread, and he ate it under the pretence of being a fashion-

able idler. Well acquainted with press technicalities, for his father had been the proprietor of a country paper in the Emerald Isle, careful, laborious and punctual, he became the editor of a literary journal, and as it was not found inconvenient to have a person so situated upon their staff, he was a welcome contributor to several magazines. In concocting the sort of articles professionally known as "padding," Van Wyan was an adept. He was also an adept in the art of sucking people's brains. Many a clever notice of new books and plays had he got out of Jack Hill, taking good care to copy them out and pass them for his own. Hence his readiness to oblige that good-for-nothing with shirt-collars and five pound notes. A laborious, but not a quick man, it took him some time to stick the fashionable boot-trees into his ideas and polish them up for his paper. It took him some time to make sure that the boot-trees he used were of the real fashionable shape. He worked away in his Chambers in Clement's Inn till five o'clock, when he dressed, put on an old pair of gloves, and walked through the back slums to the Royal Academy in Trafalgar Square, where he had his boots cleaned for a penny, put on a spick and span pair of lavender kids which he carried in his pocket, and lounged down to his

club—not a literary one—in Pall Mall, as though he had just emerged from some elegant rooms in that vicinity.

He had made a practicable breach in the outworks of good society, by a battering-ram made of pasteboard. His social position had its foundations in pasteboard. The number of visiting cards that he distributed during a season would have papered a commodious apartment. He advertised himself as a gentleman, quiet, and free from vice, very attentive to dowagers, and willing to make himself generally useful to wall-flowers, partnerless damsels, and young friends from the country—as a gentleman ready to accept dinner invitations (to fill up a vacant place) at the shortest notice—as a gentleman prepared to escort anybody anywhere, and providing that the ‘body’ was of the upper ten thousand, the ‘where’ did not matter. And he had his reward. He went to opera, ball, and fête as some people go to church—not so much because he liked to go, but because it was right to be seen there. Many a time in his early London days had he gone without his dinner for days, to save enough to buy a ticket for a flower show. He was far too methodical a gentleman to give a printer’s devil an excuse for following him into his aristocratic haunts; but had one of those

infernal creatures accosted him west of Charing Cross Hotel, and claimed him for his own, all peaceable and law-abiding as was Cornelius, I would not have insured that creature's life at ninety-nine per cent.

To Van Wyan's chambers, on the morning after that memorable day on which he had got "change" to satisfy his creditors, went Jack Hill, his hands in his pockets, a short black "clay" in his mouth, and his hat on. Van Wyan received his visitor much as a Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs would receive an Ambassador. Jack flung himself into a chair without removing his hat, and knocking the ash off his pipe on the (sham) tiger-skin hearth-rug, said—

"Well, old man, I've brought you that five pounds. Much obliged to you," and he placed the coins on the mantelpiece.

"My dear Mr. Hill," replied Cornelius, with his little ready-made smile, "I'm always charmed to see you, but I hope you did not give yourself the trouble to come about such a trifle."

"Short reckoning makes long friends," said Jack.

"That is very true—very true," replied Van Wyan, with the air of a man who had heard a clever aphorism for the first time. "And so you were at Mrs. Willerton's ball last night?"

"Who told you that?"

"My dear fellow, do you not know that your name is in the *Morning Post* amongst the guests?" replied Van Wyan, with solemnity. What would he not have given to see his name figuring in that aristocratic list, even though it came as Jack's did, last of all, immediately preceding the "&c., &c."

"I never read the *Post*," said Jack, carelessly.

"No, really? don't you? Well, I'm surprised; but, my dear Mr. Hill, tell me—amongst friends you know—how did you manage to get your name into the list? Did you—did you speak to the butler, or what?"

"I'd have seen the butler—no, I did not," returned Jack, choking himself.

"Well, do not be offended, my dear fellow. That is the usual—I mean that is sometimes done."

"*What!* Do you mean to tell me that a gentleman would ask a servant to get his name printed in the newspaper as having been to a ball?"

"It is done every day."

"Oh, Lord! what howling snobs there must be in this world of ours," cried Jack.

Cornelius winced.

"But how came you to know that I was the favoured Mr. Hill?" continued Jack,

after having glanced at the paper which the other handed him.

“Well, my laundress told me you were going.”

“Dear old Polly! she will make me out a swell in spite of me some day; but I didn’t come to talk about balls, Van, old boy, I came to ask you to do me a service.”

“My dear fellow, you have only to ask it.”

“Thank you. Well, you know, I’ve written a good many things for you, one way and another; and you’ve said that some of them were good. I’m tired of my old, lazy life, and want some occupation. I want to write regularly, Van Wyan, and I know that if you like you can get my articles accepted.”

“My dear fellow,” (everyone was his dear fellow) “you have only to send me your copy, as much as you please, and the oftener the better,” replied Van Wyan, with extreme cordiality, rising from his chair, and laying his little hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am to hear your resolve. It would be a thousand pities if your talents were lost to the public. Knowing your capabilities, I have no difficulty in saying that I will accept anything you send, and have only one small favour to ask in return.”

“And what’s that?”

"That you will not mention in the West End that you know me as a literary man."

"Why not?"

"My dear fellow, people have prejudices."

"Are you ashamed of your calling, then?"

"No, no, no. You are so hasty. My dear Hill, you don't consider. Are we all to carry our businesses emblazoned on a banner before us, like the City companies at the Lord Mayor's Show? When I go west, I like to have the printer's ink washed off my hands, that's all."

"As you will," said Jack. "It's not often that you will see my name in the *Post* now." He had his own opinion as to Van Wyan's snobbery, but he felt that he was not in a position to offend him.

"The season is certainly almost over," observed the other, misunderstanding his meaning. "I suppose you will be going out of town soon?"

"I told you just now, Van, that I was going to work. Get this *Morning Post* rot out of your head, once and for all, as far as I am concerned. Like a good fellow, you have promised to give me employment, and the only thing left is to arrange the terms."

"The terms?"

"The pounds, and shillings, and pence, as Mantilini says, 'be dimmed.' Between our-

selves, I don't mind telling you I've played the fool with my money, and am in a hole."

"With five hundred a year?" replied Van Wyan, aghast.

"I never had but two, and that was from an annuity that has come to an end—no matter how, or why. I must work for my bread, Van Wyan—work hard if I want to have cheese with it."

"Bless my soul! How sad—how very sad!" cried Cornelius, not too overcome by his feelings, however, to forget to take up the five sovereigns Jack had left on the mantel-piece, and to slip them into his waistcoat pocket.

"And so," continued Jack, "I must be paid for my work—just what it is worth, as though we were strangers, mind, no more."

"My dear fellow, if it depended upon me—"

"If what depended on you?"

"Why—why—paying as you call it for—"

"Are you not Editor of the *Excelsior*?"

"Of course; but our arrangements are made with contributors."

"Then why did you say you would take my articles, as many as I liked to send?"

"Because, my dear fellow, I thought you meant to send them for—I mean, as usual."

"For the pleasure of seeing them in print?"

"You never asked for payment," said

Van Wyan, driven into a corner, "you know you did not."

"Don't say any more, Van," said Jack, rising, "I see how it is. I'm an impostor! I go to grand balls, have my name in the *Morning Post*, and come next day asking to be allowed to earn a few pounds by the sweat of my brains! When I did not want money, I might work for you—now that I am poor, your arrangements are made!"

"My *dear* fellow!" pleaded Van Wyan, "pray, don't be so bitter! I'll see what I can do. Send me something—not too long, you know, and—and I'll—"

"No, don't trouble yourself, Van. You've been a very good-natured fellow when—well, never mind; good-day."

"Do stay and take a glass of sherry and a biscuit?"

"No, thank you, Van."

"Well, I wish you would, and—and, oh! I remember now what I wished to say to you," proceeded Van Wyan, glad to change the subject. "That dreadful dog of Mr. Beckwith's, has he not disturbed you?"

"I should think he has, the brute!"

"I really must make a complaint about it. I could not get a wink of sleep last night for howling."

"Do you know Beckwith?"

"Only by reputation. He is on the *Saturday Censor*, a very clever fellow, very hardworking and all that, but terribly mean. I have heard," continued the refined Cornelius, "that he frequently dines off a toasted herring."

"Perhaps he's poor."

"Poor, my dear fellow! He's a Quarterly Reviewer, he is on the *Censor*, and reads for Flurrey. Flurrey does not accept a manuscript that Beckwith does not approve. He makes six or eight hundred a year if he makes a penny."

"Then he's a miserable screw," said Jack, lighting his pipe afresh. "Well, good day, Van, we'll muzzle his cur, somehow."

"And look here, my *dear* fellow," said Van Wyan, taking his visitor by the button-hole as he rose to leave the room, "you will excuse me now, won't you? you see I am a man of the world, and—and—"

"Well, what is it?"

"I should like to give you a piece of advice."

"Advice!" Jack exclaimed, "I've a large unconsumed stock on hand of that article, Van. I haven't made much of it, yet; but never mind, go on," he said, somewhat bitterly.

"You see, my dear fellow," faltered Van Wyan, "you are so very frank—too frank. As an old friend, there was no harm of course in

your confiding in me, and telling *me* about the lamentable change in your position ; but my dear Hill, don't you see that it would not do for you to talk about it to other people, especially as you say you wish to get employment ?”

“Why, hang it all,” cried Jack, “if fellows won't help a man when he is so hard up as I am—”

“My *dear* fellow,” interrupted Van Wyan, “that is so like you. Your ideas, pray excuse me, your ideas are so very impracticable. Do you not know that people who acknowledge themselves to be hard up, as you call it, are always avoided ? Do take my advice, and say nothing about the loss of your income. There is no necessity for giving any excuse for turning your talents to account ; or, if one be required, you can pretend you are in debt. There's no harm in that, you know. Half the young fellows in good society are head over ears in debt.”

Poor Jack could say that he was in debt without any “pretence,” and had no reply to make.

“No, no,” continued Van Wyan, “you must not give way. Dress better, my dear fellow ; you must really admit that you are very careless in matters of dress. Tradesmen will wait, you know. Go out more into

society, and who knows but that you may get some good appointment, or marry, or—”

“Get kicked down stairs as an impostor and a swindler, as I should be, if I followed such counsel,” cried the good-for-nothing, flushing crimson, “I came here, Van, to ask you for employment, and you offer advice. I would have given you full value for the one, Van, but I won’t say even thank you for the other. Good day.”

“Dear, dear, what a hot-headed young blockhead it is!” mused Van Wyan, “and he’ll be borrowing all sorts of things now. I must really think seriously of changing my chambers, and moving farther west. I must, indeed. It would never do for me to be mixed up with such a person. Ah, this comes of doing such people a good turn. They always presume on one’s kindness.”

The “good turn” in his mind was getting Jack to write for him, and taking the credit of his pen.

Jack returned to his rooms considerably disheartened.

We left him not long ago trying to “think it all over,” and to those who know Jack Hills (there are plenty of them about) it will not be surprising that he did not begin at the beginning. He accepted Jabez Standring’s explanation of his past history, and present

condition without questioning, almost without complaint. A man who is suddenly knocked down in the street, does not lie still in the gutter, and discuss with himself the question how he came there. He picks himself up, as well as he can, gets out of the way of cabs and carts, and his first thought is how best he can get home to change his soiled clothes. So with Jack. He was thoroughly CUT ADRIFT. The anchorage he had lost was not a pleasant one to look back upon, and the waters through which he drifted were troubled enough to demand all his care, and to prevent his noticing, for the time, those evil looking breakers and the dark clouds out yonder in the offing.

There were the duns whom he had triumphantly bidden to come with their bills receipted, and whom he knew he should find assembled round his door when he returned. How he satisfied them we know, and this done, a feeling of self-contentment stole over him, which placed him very much at his ease. He thought that he had done a very noble and self-denying action, and would have drank his own health in a bumper of champagne if he had had one at hand. He who had never yet faced a difficulty and fought it out, who had never denied himself a folly, or avoided a temptation ; who had just scraped

through an awkward fix at a comparatively small sacrifice—how was he to realize his position? He thought it over in a vague way and summed it up, as he lit a fresh pipe, with a —

“Well, you lazy beggar! you’ve got to work now, whether you like it or no.”

It never struck him, in considering his own prospects, that to be willing and able to work was one thing, and to find those willing to give bread for his labour, was another. Often in reviewing small works for his friend Van Wyan, had he ridiculed the cases therein set forth of young curates preaching a good sermon and being immediately presented with a living of a thousand a year—of unknown barristers being retained, single handed, to defend *the* case of the assizes; and becoming attorney-generals forthwith—of youthful artists making a fortune on the strength of one picture, and so on. All these things he had declared to be impossible in real life. And yet if any one had come to him as he got that second pipe into a glow, and told him that *he* was not likely to jump into competence exactly as he anticipated, he would not have taken it well.

His interview with the astute Van Wyan opened his eyes a little, and they were opened wider still as he went on from editor-

friend to friend, on whom he had counted. Their arrangements were made for the present. They would gladly receive any article he might send, and consider it; but—they did not say so in so many words, but poor Jack was quick enough to see that they meant—"You are an outsider. We are not going to turn sheep out of the fold to let you in. You must work your way, and bide your time, as many a better man has done before you." Besides he had the greatest difficulty in persuading anyone that he was in earnest. When he first broached the subject at the "Birds of Eve" confidentially to the sub-editor of a popular magazine, that gentleman burst out laughing, and shouted, "Here's a joke! Jack Hill going to work. By Jove! we shall have the zebra of the Zoo going into single harness next."

Well, he could not cavil at the justice of this. How often had he broken his promises? How could he expect others to believe in resolves which he hardly believed in himself a few days ago? After all there was balm in Gilead. His burlesque, accepted by Mr. Moss for the Regency, would provide grist for the mill, until other things were ready. But here came disappointment again. After having worked hard at the piece till it was nearly ready, he received a polite note from

Mr. Moss, dated Paris, stating that he had accepted a liberal offer for the Regency, and would close his season at the end of the present month. He had, in fact, sold the theatre and its belongings to Miss Sallie Spring; at any rate, it was to stand in her name as "sole lessee and manager." The fair Sallie, as we know, did not approve of "classical things," and Jack's burlesque was deemed to come within the prescribed category. Serve him right! He had dared to travesty the "Idylls of the King," but in a manner which Planché or poor Frank Talfourd would have tolerated! That is to say, he had turned those exquisite lays into fun without vulgarity, and as he would not hear of making King Arthur dance a breakdown, or of giving Vivien's part to Guinevere, there was nothing in it, as Miss Spring said, for her.

The rosy lights under which Jack had begun to "think it over," were fading away rapidly; and yet he had to "think it over" more and more.

We have seen that one of his main inducements to quit the idle, useless life he had been leading was, apart from his reverse of fortune, to make himself fit to enter the society of good women, of which his visit to Southerton and the good advice of kind Mrs.

Clair, had somewhat tardily shown him the charm. In his first confidence, in his subsequent disappointment and depression, the faces of Mary Aylwarde and Constance Conway would come before his mind's eye, not separate or blended, but so that the one always appeared to shine through the other. When his thoughts were at the gloomiest, he would find himself suddenly smiling at the recollection of little Con's delight with her first ball-dress, and wondering at the cause of the sad, old look which had so often settled on her face during their ramble at Southerton the day when they caught the big pike.

What were they to him now ? He had seen in the papers that Mary Aylwarde's father had become Earl Hilton. He knew that Master Fred Willerton had profited by his introduction to Miss Sallie Spring in a way that would shut the doors of his mother's house against him, as soon as his part in the affair became known. He would never have the chance of meeting Mary or Constance again. With his humble two hundred a-year as a foundation, he could easily have kept up the appearance of a gentleman, and had leisure to court society, in which he might see them ; but now—oh, it was no use bothering his brains. He could at best be only a drudge on the skirts of literature,

or pick up a Bohemian living by his wits. The cloud, once not so big as a man's hand, began to darken his entire Heaven, and because everything was not to be gained at once, his undisciplined mind revolted against doing anything, what was the use?

In a fit of despondency he revisited his old haunt, Black's billiard room, sacred to the memories of Teddy Price and Barker, and the set which he had vowed to renounce. Many a pound had he expended in his early days in mastering the mysteries of pool, and there being two or three fresh hands present, he won in two hours as much as two days hard work for the magazines would bring, with this advantage to a man in his position, that the money was paid down. There was no waiting for manuscripts to be read and considered, for the proofs to be corrected, and the articles to appear. Click, clack! the ball was in the pocket, the last "life" was gone, the pool was won.

With his head a little dizzy, owing to the libations poured out in honour of his return to his old haunt, and his pockets full of silver, Jack went back to his chambers to "think it over" once more—with this result.

"Well, hang it, what's the good of being respectable," he thought; "everything's against me but the balls. They are not un-

grateful Van Wyans, or incredulous sub-editors. I can make them do as I like."

So he could to a certain degree; but there were others in the set which he had rejoined who could do so too, who played with skill not inferior to his, and with a caution, and it must be added, an unscrupulousness, with which he could not compete. There was not much to be won in the long run from men like Barker and Teddy Price, and others who played pool as a matter of business; and to seek pigeons to be plucked, or even to pluck them when they fluttered round the table eager for the operation, was what the good-for-nothing had not yet come to. Indeed he got into trouble with Mr. Barker, for telling Fred Willerton, who still sought his society when not in attendance upon Miss Sallie Spring, "that he was a young fool to play with them, for the greatest muff in the party could lick his head off." Mr. Barker had arranged a little game of pyramids with the young gentleman for the next afternoon, when they could have the rooms to themselves, you know; and he was not pleased with Jack.

Jack was making a bad hand of it even as a gambler. The balls ran contrary, his luck deserted him, and many a day when he had denied himself a dinner to provide capital for

the night's play, he went supperless to bed.

It is worthy of remark that Jabez Standing, who could have no acquaintances in the set which frequented Black's, and to whom a billiard-room was an ante-chamber of a place not to be named, knew all that was going on, and more than once muttered to himself—the ugly scar on his cheek blazing fiercely the while—those words which he had used when Jack left his presence a beggar, “Now we shall see.”

Oh! Jack, Jack! No one could accuse you of want of physical pluck; but if you only had a little moral courage. If something would happen to take you as it were out of your self; some one to be dependent on you, some one to touch your hardening heart, and cause its hidden waters to flow. It would need but a slight touch, Jack; but there is no one to give it, and the reproachful faces which haunt your dreams are growing more and more dim and distant.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN UPSTAIRS.

THINGS were going very badly with Jack. Luck, which he had so often said must turn in his favour, stood out against him, as he thought, with extraordinary consistency. Those who looked on, saw that he had his full share of the public Goddess' favour; but had lost nerve and confidence, so that he could not profit by it. He was becoming very down-hearted, was Jack. He had taken lately to breakfasting out, and caught a sore throat which prevented him from swallowing anything but bread and tea for dinner. At least so he told his faithful Polly Secundus. The truth was, that the poor fellow had not the wherewithal to pay for his meals, and in his present condition he shrunk, with a feeling quite new to him, from running into debt. Besides, in his brief reign of "luck," he had inaugurated his new system of paying ready money, and could not relapse.

So he breakfasted out. Out! His furni-

ture was barely worth the rent that was due. To pay the hundred pounds he still owed, he had not a hundred halfpence. Out! If everyone had his due, he would have been out in the streets as any beggar that begged there.

One morning good Mrs. Jowers entered his chambers with an unusually serious expression on her jolly face.

"Oh, Mr. Hill," she said, "I'm sure there's something wrong with Mr. Beckwith. His outer door's bin shut these two days; and Miss Clamber as did for him, she's bin and left."

"Good job too," said Jack, "I hope they're got married, and will live unhappily ever after."

"Oh, Mr. Hill! a quiet gentleman like that. Besides, the dog's there, he'd never go and leave the dog, and he so fond of it."

"The brute!"

"He's got a tame starling, too, as hops about the room, and out on the tiles. It stands on his hand and talks ever so. He'd never leave it to starve," pleaded Polly, Q.C. for the defendant.

"Oh, he's all right," replied Jack. "I heard him smash something—a jug or a dish—some crockery thing—last night, when that beastly thing was howling. Perhaps he shied it at its head. I hope he hit it."

"Oh, sir!" insisted Polly Secundus. "If you'll believe me, I *do* think there's something wrong. Do come up and listen."

Jack went with her to the chambers of the man upstairs, and listened at the closed door. He heard the whining of the dog, and—yes, there was no mistaking it, he heard a low moan. He knocked violently at the massive door, and called—no answer.

"Polly," he said, "cut along to the nearest carpenter, and tell him to come here with a screw-jack and his biggest cold chisel. I'll have this door open, if it's only to get that howling cur out. We'll send him to the Refuge for Homeless Dogs, Polly, and I hope they'll like him."

The good-for-nothing spoke lightly, but something whispered to him that there was a more homeless creature than the dog inside that closed door.

He was right. When the door was broken open, they found on the floor, close to the bed, and as though he had fallen from it, the body of a once strong man—the dead body as they thought—and standing over it a small, wire-haired terrier, which barked furiously, and snapped at them as they approached. They drove away the dog, and raised the body; and as they did so a faint cry of "Water—for God's sake—water!"

proved that their worst fears were not realised. There was no necessity to touch his burning hand, to feel his galloping pulse—his wildly staring eyes—his sunken, but blazing cheeks, his wasted form ; his incessant cry for “water—water,” showed, too plainly, that some fierce fever was consuming him. And there he lay—had lain for two days and nights—alone !

“Polly,” said Jack, as soon as he had lifted him upon the bed, had moistened his parched lips, and smoothed the pillows tenderly under his poor, throbbing head ; “you go and fetch Doctor James. Tell him I want him, and he’ll come like a bird. Polly, you’ve a husband and children ; we don’t know what this illness may be. You mustn’t risk it, Polly.”

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Hill, I—”

“Go for the doctor, Polly. One of us must go,” (the carpenter, who opened the door, had decamped, frightened at the chance of infection the moment the word ‘fever’ was spoken) “and I intend to see this out.” For the first time in his life Jack spoke sternly to her, and she went.

As she opened the door to go out, the dog rushed in, sprang upon the bed, and nestled under her master’s arm, alternately licking his fever-blazing face, and showing a double

row of bright little white fangs at Jack. Jack was one of those whom children and animals trust at first sight, but no coaxing or threats could win or cow that little terrier, or lure her from her nest. Once, when in answer to the sick man's incessant cry for "water—water," Jack's hand slipped, and he spilt a few drops on the bed, the dog sprang forward and eagerly licked the wet sheet. Jack filled a dish, and held it to her. She drank it up to the last drop, growled, and returned to her nest under her master's arm, looking into his unconscious face with a look of almost human apology for having left him even for that moment.

"Little dog," said Jack, "I don't know your name. I've called you many a hard word, and vowed many a hard thing against you when we should meet. We have met, and I beg your pardon, little dog. If your master should get well again, I hope we three neighbours will be better friends. If he should die,—be half as faithful to me, little dog, as you are to him, and I shall never want a friend. Ah, you may snarl, I like you all the better for that; if I could have won you with the bribe of a drink of water, I should have thought very little of you. Snarl away, good little dog."

As he spoke, something whizzed past his

ear that made him start. It was the starling of which Mrs. Jowers had spoken. Like the dog, the poor thing had been for two days without food or drink. It had heard the lapping of water, and had flown down, hopping along the bed, with its comical curious look, to see what was going on. Jack filled the dish again, and the bird jumped into it and drank as though it had never drank before. Then it flew back to its cage, cocked its bright eye wisely into the tin which should contain its food, as much as to say, "you've only done half your work, I'm hungry."

Jack ran down to his room, got a hunk of bread, and divided it in unequal shares between the dog and the bird. The former bolted his portion under protest—growling the while. The starling eat his sop in very good humour, and then flew down to the bed again, perched upon the inanimate hand of its master, and looked puzzled. Then after mature reflection screamed out "I'm—I'm—I'm—Mr. Beckwith's bird—whose bird are you?" and flew back to his sop.

"Surely we have wronged this man," Jack mused, "in deeming him morose and selfish. None but a gentle mind could have won these dumb brutes to love him as they do."

Then the doctor came, and Jack resolutely

forbade Mrs. Jowers to accompany him to the bedside.

Mr. James, by courtesy doctor, had an immense practice in that teaming neighbourhood, a ready and a resolute practitioner, and one who could afford to say in answer to Jack's anxious inquiries, "That he really could not tell what was exactly the matter."

"It's a fever," he said, "and a bad one; but I'm not a conjuror to tell what sort it is till it declares itself. It may be brain fever, it may be typhus, it may be rheumatic; I *think* it's nervous, but that is only a guess. He can give us no help, poor fellow. How long has he been ill?"

"God knows!" replied Jack, "we found him on the floor as though—"

"Yes, Mrs. Jowers told me; but has he no friends?"

"His dog and his bird, I know of no others," said Jack, "we—we didn't seek him, and he kept away from us."

"Well, give me some paper and a pen, and I'll write a prescription. Get it made up at once and give it him. It may curb the fever; and I'll come back in an hour or two and see how he goes on. Put some cool cloths on his head, or some ice if you can get it. Keep him quiet, and don't let him talk on any account."

There was a sort of little den that served as a pantry, and had a grated window looking out upon the landing. Through this, our good-for-nothing hailed Mrs. Jowers, and gave her the prescription, and a few shillings to pay for the medicine, which he found upon the dressing-table.

"James says it may be typhus," he said with some of his old gaiety, "and therefore no Pollies are allowed on the premises. Pollies with husbands and children are bad for typhus. You go and get the nasty doctor's stuff, Polly, and give it me through the window; and, Polly, get some ice from the Caledonian stores, and wrap it up warm in a flannel petticoat or it'll melt," and so he vanished.

He soaked a handkerchief in water, and as he laid it on the sufferer's head, the dog bit him. "Good little dog," he said, "we shall understand each other better by and by." Then he drew a chair close to the bed, and had time to look about and think.

With the exception of the little den aforesaid, the chambers consisted of one room poorly furnished. A large table near the window was littered with manuscripts, writing materials, and new books for review. An unfinished article lay on the desk. It was clear that Beckwith had been struck down in

the middle of his work. He was not even entirely undressed. Impelled by thirst he had risen and tried to lift the water-jug. Strong man as he had been it was too heavy for him, had slipped from his grasp, and he had fallen from exhaustion before he could reach the bed. The crash of the broken jug was the noise that Jack had heard the night before. The man upstairs had therefore lain where he was found for full fourteen hours—alone !

Jack changed the cloths upon his head, poured the medicine into his unresisting lips, and watched over him with an increasing interest. The man whom he disliked, whose reputation for meanness he had helped to spread, whom he had once gone out of his way to annoy by the noise and riot he encouraged in his rooms below—lay more helpless than a child under his hands. His very helplessness warmed the good-for-nothing heart towards him. I have seen a boy, who would have thought it rather good sport to drown a kitten, strive his utmost to bring to life a kitten which some one else had half drowned. I have seen a man whom I know to be utterly callous to human suffering help a fly out of the cream-jug, and watch it with interest as it crawled on the tablecloth trying to shake off the coveted richness

which might have been its grave. Neither such a boy or such a man cares much perhaps for the creature they save ; but they like to see that their own efforts to save it are successful. We may be indifferent to sufferings we have caused, because we always hate the thing we wrong ; but to see one whom we have wronged suffering from an act not our own, should give us a heart though we had none. Our good-for-nothing felt that he had wronged Beckwith, he could not tell how—but he felt it ; all the generous impulses of his nature urged him to move heaven and earth to save him. The idea that under existing circumstances he had quite as much as he could do to provide for himself, struck him only as a rather pleasant one. The question as to whether he was called upon to provide for this sick stranger, never occurred to him. “ I daresay it’s all right,” he mused, “ I must work for both now ;” and as he thus mused, the presence of Constance Conway seemed to fill the room, and her sad sweet face to smile on him through the deepening twilight.

Dr. James returned towards ten o’clock, and was able then to state that his “ guess ” was well founded.

“ It is *a* nervous fever,” he said, “ the man has overworked himself. He has fretted his

nervous system into rags. Keep him quiet."

"Is it catching?" Jack asked.

"Is a broken leg catching?" asked the doctor, rather contemptuously.

"I did not ask for myself," replied Jack, "that good old creature, Jowers, would help me nurse him if—"

"Jowers isn't afraid for herself."

"But I was for her—she has a family, James."

"Oh, there's no fear. Let her attend to him—what do you know about nursing?"

"I'll do my share," said Jack, quietly. "What are we to give him?"

"Slops at present. Good jelly and strong beef-tea, as much as he can swallow, in a day or two," the doctor replied. "Keep him perfectly quiet. Don't let him talk, put pen and ink out of his sight; and if he looks at a book, throw it out of window."

The doctor's prescriptions began to have their effect. The fever diminished; the horrid glare died out of the sick man's eyes; the lids fell in sleep, if not in rest; and the once ceaseless moan was still. Jack took time by the forelock, and set to work for both. He finished certain tales and poems that he had begun before his relapse, and in his other—I can hardly call them better, days; and was up betimes in the

morning to turn them into "good jelly, and strong beef-tea."

His comrades, the "Birds of Eve," proved themselves better friends than the fashionable Van Wyan. Candidly he told his necessities, and candidly they answered him. "Why the deuce did you not say so at first?" they said. "Who was to suppose that a bloated young aristocrat like you were really in earnest?" Still he made no very great progress so far.

In real life there is a prejudice in favour of established reputations. When we are sick, we do not send for young Mr. Pestle who has just passed "the College," and has fitted his red lamp in the new terrace round the corner. When we want a fine work of art, we do not search the attics of Soho to find it. When our enemy brings that action-at-law against us, we do not put our affairs into the hands of Greenhorn and Company, and direct them to retain Mr. Briefless to wage our cause in the Court of Common Pleas against Stormer, Q.C., and Mr. Sergeant Dodger, the counsel "on the other side." We go to Saville Row for our doctor, to the Royal Academy for our picture. We set the Attorney-General and Mr. Longhead to oppose the leading counsel of the plaintiff; and we do no injustice. There *may* be in some Soho attic a picture which will some

day gain for its painter the honours of "the line." Young Mr. Pestle, by hard work, and by taking advantage of opportunities, may yet drive his carriage, and be physician extraordinary to her Majesty. Mr. Briefless may have that in him which will make him a judge, when Stormer, Q.C., is on the shelf—only such aspirants have to work hard and patiently, and to wait for their chance, as Jack found that he had to wait for his.

It arrived sooner than he had any right to expect. The day but one after his discovery of Beckwith's illness—a Friday—there came a knock at the door. Jack looked out of the window of the little den, and saw a small boy in a paper cap seated calmly on the upper step of the stairs.

"What do you want?" shouted Jack.

"Copy," shouted the boy.

"Don't you wish you may get it?" said Jack.

"All right," said the boy, "Mister Beckwith's generally reg'lar, he is."

"He's too ill to write," replied Jack.

"I ain't in a hurry. I'll wait," answered the boy, leaning himself against the bannisters, and composing himself for sleep.

A bright thought struck Jack. He had noticed on Beckwith's table an unfinished article on the line of subjects for which he

was famous in the *Saturday Censor*, and numerous rough notes, evidently intended as material for its completion.

"Gentle youth," said Jack, returning to the den, and addressing the printer's devil, "if you have anything to do, go and do it. There is one who findeth mischief still for idle hands to do. Go back to the place whence you came, or play tip-cat in the court, employ your elegant leisure in any way you please for an hour, and then come back again."

"I'll wait," reiterated the boy, "Mr. Beckwith's generally reg'lar, he is."

"Gentle youth," returned Jack, "if you wait, you will get kicked down the stairs—nothing else. If you go away, and return, you may get what you want. Which shall it be?"

"Mr. Beckwith's generally—"

"If you go on with that parrot's jabber, I'll come and brain you," shouted Jack. "How the deuce can a man write with an imp like you waiting?"

The "imp" looked amazed. Jack, you see, was new to his business. Nevertheless, the boy departed, and in due time carried off the "copy," and a note to the editor explaining how it came to be finished by another hand.

An hour or two afterwards the editor himself appeared—a grave gentlemanly man,

without a shade of Bohemia about his person or manner.

"I am sorry to hear that Mr. Beckwith is ill," he said, "may I see him?"

"No," replied Jack; "besides, it would be no good, he has not spoken to anyone yet."

"I am sorry, very sorry. May I ask if it was you who finished the article we received to-day?"

"I just strung his rough notes together," replied Jack; "I hope it will do."

"It will do. But what about next week? Has he left any other notes?" asked the editor.

"Not that I know of."

The editor looked vexed.

"I do not like to break off this series," he said, "and at the end of the season when nearly everybody—"

"Look here, sir," Jack burst out, "I don't pretend to be able to write like Beckwith, but I can write. Let me send you something in his line, and something in my own; in his name, you know, till he gets better."

"You are very good," replied the editor; "I will certainly read anything you may send us, but I cannot promise—"

"Oh, yes, I understand all that," interrupted the blunt good-for-nothing, who knew well what was coming, "I'll take my chance."

This conversation took place in the passage, which, however, commanded a view of part of the room beyond. What he saw was not lost on the cool gentlemanly editor of the *Censor*.

Jack wrote the articles—the one in Beckwith's line, the other in his own. In return he received a very illegible note enclosing a very legible one, and returning the article in "Beckwith's line." The illegible note, when deciphered, was found to state that the writer, fully aware of the difficulties which one author had in accommodating himself to the style of another, was obliged to decline one of the articles sent. The other would be published. The legible note directed Messrs. Twinings and Co., to pay to John Hill, Esq, or bearer, the sum of twenty-one pounds; and the illegible one explained that of this sum twelve pounds were due to Mr. Beckwith for past contributions, that three were in payment for Mr. Hill's accepted article, and that the balance was for Mr. Beckwith *on account*. "It may be convenient," added the illegible one, "for that gentleman to receive a small amount in advance, and it is quite the same to me."

"Hang it!" cried Jack, "these swells are not all Van Wyans. This fellow's a brick."

But how fared it with Jack before this

timely aid arrived. Well, his sore throat did not get better, but he ate his bread and tea with a very good appetite, notwithstanding Beckwith's dog and bird fared better; but then, you know, they had not sore throats, and could not well dine "out." As for the man upstairs, he had his good jelly and strong beef-tea, and Jack rejoiced when the sick man got strength enough to abuse him for pouring them down his throat.

When first he regained consciousness, he appeared perplexed and annoyed at seeing Jack seated at his table. Luckily, Mrs. Jowers, whom he knew, was in the room to quiet and re-assure him.

He clutched her dress with his wasted hand, and whispered.

"Is not that the man who lives below?"

"Yes, sir; but you must not talk—indeed you mustn't, the doctor—"

"What is he doing here?"

"Oh, Mr. Beckwith, sir; if it hadn't a bin for him you wouldn't be speaking now; but you must be still."

"Have I been long ill?"

"Four or five days; but hush, hush!"

"And he—has he—"

"He's bin nursing you night and day."

"I must get up and write."

"You must not, indeed. You have

not strength, you know you haven't."

"Good God! what will become of me?" groaned Beckwith, sinking back upon his pillow. As he moved, the dog sprang forward and licked his face with a whine of joy. "Poor little Wasp, poor Wasp!" he said. "Has anyone fed the dog and the bird—is the bird alive?"

"Oh, you never fret about them. Mr. Hill takes good care of them."

"The man who lives below?" repeated the sick man, in a tone of surprise and inquiry.

"I will take care of your pets, Mr. Beckwith," said Jack, coming forward. "Have no fear for them or for yourself, so far as I can be of any help."

Beckwith closed his eyes, exhausted by the effort of speaking. A few minutes afterwards they opened again, and sought the good old laundress. She went to him.

"Is it *really* the man who lives below?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, sir, really; and the kindest gentleman that—"

"Has any one else been to see me?"

"Yes, Mr. Clitherowe," replied Jack.

"The editor of the *Censor*."

"Exactly; and I have arranged everything for you," Jack struck in. "Have no fear about your engagements, I am writing for you."

“*You?*”

“As well as I can ; but you must not, and you shall not talk. Set your mind at ease, everything is all right. You’ve got to take your medicine ; hold your tongue and get well—that’s all.”

“And you are the Mr. Hill that—that—”

“Used to annoy you with his idiotic noise. The Genius of Discord once, now the God of Silence. If you want to get worse, you’ll talk, Mr. Beckwith ; but devil an answer will you get from me or Polly, and if Wasp says a word, I’ll wring her neck.”

When the invalid slept once more, Jack went down to his own rooms to dine. The legible note to Messrs. Twining had brought a wonderful cure of his sore throat. He could now eat a chop and sausage from the “Caledonian Stores,” and drink a pint of stout with much gusto, greatly to the delight of Polly Secundus, to whom his reverse of fortune was at present unknown.

“I’ve found out all about that creature Miss Clamber, sir,” said she.

“Well, sit down, Polly, and out with it.”

“You wouldn’t believe me, Mr. Hill, it’s too bad.”

“My dear Polly, nothing is too bad—there’s always something badder.”

“No badder than Susan Clamber,” said

Mrs. Jowers warmly. "I up and spoke my mind to her in the presence of Mr. Flowers, the beadle, and she made a clean breast of it—the brazen! Toosday last she took a holiday, without so much as asking with your leave of her gentleman, and went out in a wan to Hampton Court with the young fellow—I pity him—as keeps company with her. Well, sir, if you'll believe me, when she comes back at night, she goes to Mr. Beck-with's rooms to make them up; she hadn't bin there since the morning of the day before, and she finds him dreadful ill. Does she send for a doctor, or call the neighbours? Not she! She says she was afeard it were something catching, small-pock or something, and she was afraid of spoiling her precious face. Next day she got ashamed of herself and dursent tell, and so that poor dear gentleman was left to die, and if hadn't bin—"

"For you, Polly," interrupted Jack, "he would have died. As soon as I have about two minutes and a half of spare time, Polly, I'll settle that Clamber's business. It will be my fault if any one else is left to her tender mercies. May her young man jilt her; may her crinoline fall off into the fish-pond the next time she goes to Hampton Court; may she marry a policeman, I cannot wish her worse."

"But she stands out that she's all right," cried the indignant Polly. "Says she, 'I was paid to clean his room, not to nurse him,' she says; 'it was no business of mine that he was ill,' she says."

"Then the worst thing we can wish her, Polly," said Jack seriously, "is that she may one day find out that it *was* her business."

If the reader be inclined to think that such heartlessness could not be, the writer begs to assure him, out of his own experience, that such heartlessness *has been*.

CHAPTER IV.

FRED WILLERTON'S PROGRESS.

PARLIAMENT was on its last legs. The annual "massacre of innocents," had commenced. Popular M.P.'s complained that nothing had been done during the season. Fashionable M.P.'s got out of the way of doing anything. It was very hot. The Thames was not pleasant. The vigil of St. Grouse was at hand. The feast of St. Partridge not far distant. White sails gleamed in the Solent. Gay loungers thronged the esplanade at Scarborough and Brighton. Tidal trains were full of hard-worked men as eager as schoolboys for their holidays. The Lady's Mile was deserted, and Cornelius Van Wyan would not have been seen in Pall Mall for any consideration short of being made a Commissioner of Lunacy on the spot.

Still there were a million or two of decent people about London, and work in Parliament and out of it to be done. Spencer Willerton had some arrears, consequent upon the interregnum in his office, to pull up, therefore his family did not leave town as soon as they

had anticipated. Mr. Frederick Willerton found the side-scenes of the "Regency" Theatre to be the centre of the universe—a new Paradise of which the fair Sallie Spring was the Eve, or the apple, or the other person—not Adam—of whom we read as having caused some trouble, once upon a time, in the original garden of that name. He looked forward with dread to the day when a stern parental decree might shut up his hotel in Eaton Square, and consign him to banishment in the Isle of Wight. I say "his hotel," because he used his home merely as a place to take his meals and sleep in, on his return from—elsewhere, in the small hours of the morning. He had ceased to plague his fond, foolish mother for money, and she had sense enough to know that this was a bad sign. Where did he pass his time? The stamp which dissipation imprints on a young man's face is a costly article. There was the stamp, growing deeper and deeper every day. Where did he obtain the funds to pay for its impression? mused his mother. Matters were not mended when there arrived a letter from the astute Mr. Knouse, the army examination crammer of the Marylebone Road, inquiring anxiously about his pupil's health, as he had not seen him for some time. This letter, addressed

to Spencer Willerton, was intercepted by his wife, who about this time had begun to have a dread of strange looking letters, fearing that they might be "about Fred." One very strange one had already reached his father's hands, containing a livery-stable keeper's bill for hire of horses and *carriages*.

"If he wanted a horse, why on earth could he not have asked me for one," said the statesman to his wife, "and carriages, too—what carriages? He might have had the brougham, I suppose, for asking?"

"Not to go to races, my dear," replied the mother, as calmly as she could, suggesting the only excuse that she could think of.

"*Were* these carriages hired to go to races?"

"I don't know—I—I suppose so. I—" stammered the lady.

"Let him attend to his studies, and leave racing alone," replied Willerton, sternly. "He knows my resolve. Let him fail in his examination again, and I withdraw his name. I will pay this bill; let it be the last for any similar folly."

It was not the last, but Willerton saw no other. Oh, my fast young friends, do you ever think of the shifts, the deceits, the falsehoods that the love for you wrings from those pure ones at home? Will you never count the dents on the tender shield that is

ever raised to save your worthless heads?

To his mother, Fred Willerton had one standard excuse for his absences. "Oh, he had been with Jack Hill—awfully jolly fellow—Jack. Knew a lot of clever fellows—literary fellows, and all that. Took him to Ascot—awfully jolly."

But why had he (Fred) not been to his tutor? Oh, old Knouse was an ass. He'd let him in before. *He* wasn't going to trust to Knouse. He had a lot of fellows who had passed to put him up to the dodge questions. He was all right!

The Chelsea Board, however, did not think so. They neglected to put the "dodge questions" for which he was prepared, and as he appeared incompetent to keep a company's accounts, and write a report in grammatical English, they did not recommend him to Her Majesty for a commission—and his father kept his word.

That wonderful freemasonry which seems to exist between Army Crammers, Army Agents, Army Tailors and the Horse Guards, caused the erasure of Master Fred's name from the list of military aspirants to be soon known; and a whole flight of strange looking letters descended in Eaton Square.

It appeared that Mr. Frederick Willerton had given his valuable custom to three tailors

during the last month, and had ordered of them on an average four suits of clothes a week. There were hints in the epistles enclosing these accounts about I.O.U.'s, and bills that were coming due, and in one a plain demand for fifty pounds "money lent." He had also patronised two jewellers, in whose little accounts there were items for bracelets and ear-rings. A theatrical costumier had made him a fancy dress of a very gorgeous and peculiar description—just such a one for example as he might have required, if *he* had played the part of Prince Prettyfellow in the new burlesque at the "Regency," instead of Miss Sallie Spring. There was another, livery-stable account besides that sent in by the impatient person before mentioned. He was in the books of a fancy perfumer for what would have served to set up a small shop. In short, there came strange-looking letters detailing debt to the amount of upwards of seven hundred pounds, the greater part of which had been contracted in four weeks!

Young gentlemen studying for their commissions are treated with great consideration by a certain class of tradesmen. They have a good deal on their minds, you see. They must not be troubled about ready money. They can order what they please. Any time will do to pay—a year, two years—whenever

it may be convenient. Their commission is their security, and once *that* is got—a note to their parents or their colonel is sufficient to obtain a settlement, even though it should *not* be convenient. This is an old story. The Right Honourable Spencer Willerton's only son had no difficulty in obtaining credit, only when the withdrawal of his name from the list of embryo ensigns showed that "something was wrong," the credit was cut short. "Any time" would not do now.

Mrs. Willerton's heart sank lower and lower as she opened bill after bill. What was to be done? Where was Fred? He had not shown his face at home after his disgrace. "Oh, if he has done some dreadful act in his despair!" sobbed the poor mother. (He was at that moment driving Miss Spring in Richmond Park, preparatory to dining with her at the Star and Garter.)

In her bewilderment, poor Mrs. Willerton naturally consulted her brother.

"Oh, Bertram, it's all through that dreadful Mr. Hill. He has led my poor boy to destruction—what will his father say? I am sure he did not borrow for himself. I gave him plenty. It must have been for Mr. Hill whom he admitted to be a gambler. My poor, poor deluded boy, how he has been robbed! Bertram, it is utterly impossible

that he could have wanted all these things for himself!"

Lord Hilton thought so too, especially when he observed an item for a lady's riding habit in one of the tailor's bills, and read the description of the bracelets and ear-rings which the jewellers had supplied. But he said nothing, and let all his sister's wrath fall upon the delinquent Hill. There are some things which we cannot talk about even to our sisters.

Days passed, and still no Frederick. He had become hardened and reckless. "There must be a jolly row," he argued, "and as I am in for it, I may as well have my fling." So he took lodgings in Brompton and had his fling. His father, who had been favoured with his company about six times in the last six months, did not miss him, and thought it not unnatural that he should be ashamed to show himself. Spencer Willerton so bold and straightforward as a public man, so ready to meet his country's and his party's difficulties, had not the moral courage to seek his erring son. He saw that his wife was suffering; but guessed not one tenth part of the cause. The very servants knew more than he did.

Lord Hilton was a practical man in other people's business. His first idea was the

usual advertisement—he had faith in advertisements, as we know—calling on Fred to return, and all would be forgiven; but to this his sister objected, Fred's father would see it. (Just as if he had time to read advertisements.) The next suggestion was to employ a detective. "Oh, no, that would be such a disgrace." A dozen other proposals met with similar objections; and then the poor lady fell back, as though for relief, on the villainy of the wretch, the betrayer of innocence, the outcast Hill; and you may be sure she was well echoed by her "dearest Matilda." Constance spoke up for Jack in her nervous excitable way, and was sent away to her room in disgrace for her pains. Mary Aylwarde looked pained whilst these denunciations were made, but said nothing. She was biding her time. As for pretty spoilt Milly, she tried to treat the matter as a jest, and declared that she thought nothing of a man who had not been wild. What was seven hundred pounds to Mrs. Willerton? She liked Fred all the more for having cut his leading strings.

"Oh, Milly, if it were seven thousand, I would pay it," sobbed his mother, "if he would only come back. It's not the wretched money. It is the wicked company he keeps."

"I beg your pardon, dear aunt Willerton, for interfering in what does not concern me," said Mary Aylwarde, in her low gentle voice, "but I cannot think that Mr. Hill is so bad as you suppose."

"What do you know about him?"

"Very little; but enough to hope that you are wrong. Oh, papa," she continued, "will you take me to him. If he has such influence over my cousin, he will surely use it to make him come home if we tell him how his poor mother is suffering. He *could not* refuse."

"Now, that's just like you, Mary," said her father, sharply, "taking the part of a scamp like that, and wanting to go to him, and disgrace yourself! Besides, who's to know where to find him?" he added, as reflection showed that his daughter's idea was not a bad one.

"He lives at No. 37, Clement's Inn."

"How the deuce do you know?" cried the peer aghast.

"When I danced with him at the ball, he spoke of his old nurse at Southerton. I wrote to her, and asked for his address, I have only just received her answer."

"Upon my word, Lady Mary Aylwarde, you seem to take a great interest in this black-guard," said her father, with a sneer.

"I thought," replied Mary meekly, "that

we might find my cousin through Mr. Hill, or—or—”

“Or what—pray, let us have all your reasons?”

“That it would be fair to give him a chance of clearing himself,” and here the kind English eyes rose; but not a blush came to her cheek. If she had given *all* her reasons for writing to Mrs. Prosser, she would have said, “I did so, my poor dear foolish papa, because I was sure that if you had written, you would have said something to offend the old dame, or to make her think that you meant harm to her foster-child, and so would not have got an answer.”

“Of course, I could not think of taking Mary to Clement’s Inn,” said Lord Hilton to his sister, after a pause, “but I don’t think it is at all a bad idea of her’s that some one should see the fellow. Shall I go?”

“Oh, if you would!”

Mary Aylwarde ran up to Constance Conway’s room.

“Papa is going to see Mr. Hill,” she said, “and I’m sure he will be angry, and not say anything; you know papa’s haughty way. Oh, Con, what shall we do?”

“Let us write to him—tell him what they say, and ask him for his own sake not to be foolish, and to clear himself.”

"There's no time, dear, papa is going directly. Aunt Willerton ordered the brougham for him just as I left the drawing-room."

"Then if Jack gets angry with Lord Hilton, let you and I go to him, Mary. He must, and he *shall* clear himself."

"Oh, Con! that would not be proper."

"What wouldn't?"

"Why, for us to go to a young man's chambers."

"I don't care whether it be proper or not," said Constance. "If you will not go with me, Mary, I'll go alone. They shall not abuse him as they do, and he shall clear himself," she added with flashing eyes and heaving bosom.

It will be observed that the name of Mr. Frederick Willerton was not once mentioned in the above conversation—that the sole anxiety of these young ladies was, that our good-for-nothing should "clear himself," and that they had no fear of his being able to do so, if only he were not rubbed the wrong way.

Jack Hill was working away at an article for the *Censor* in Beckwith's room. Beckwith sitting in an easy chair by the window with Wasp on his knee. It was a bright, warm afternoon, and the starling was busy on the parapet, rushing after the sparrows,

who appeared to be out-door pensioners of his master, declaring emphatically that he was Mr. Beckwith's bird, and requiring to be informed whose birds were they.

Beckwith was out of all danger now, but miserably weak and shaken—too weak even to be taken down into Jack's larger and better room. After many a fight, he had at last given in to the doctor's orders, and abandoned the thoughts of working for the present. He had begun to understand "the man who lived below," and to be reconciled to the idea that he was to write for him. He did not know that Jack was working for himself as well.

Enter Polly Secundus with a visiting-card, held gingerly in the corner of her apron, between a soapy finger and thumb.

"If you please, Mr. Hill, there's a gentleman in your room as wants to see you."

Jack took the card, and gave a long whistle.

"Who is it?" asked Beckwith.

"Oh, only a lord!" replied Jack, rising. "The Earl of Hilton! what the deuce does the Earl of Hilton want with me?"

"You'd better go and find out," said the invalid.

"My dear old fellow!" said Jack, "you are getting the most brilliant ideas. If you would only take your cod liver oil more re-

gularly, you would astonish the world. I *will* go down."

So he went, and seeing his visitor, cried :

"Oh, Mr. Aylwarde ! I understood"—and he looked again at the card.

"You are not aware, then, that I have succeeded to the Hilton title?" said the other, haughtily.

"I beg your pardon, my lord ; for the moment I forgot. Pray sit down," said Jack.

"No, sir !" replied the new peer, "my errand is a brief one. Do you think it a fair or a proper thing, Mr. Hill, to seduce a young man of family from his home ; to plunge him into dissipation ; to encourage him to neglect his studies ; to ruin his prospects ; to break his mother's heart—to—to play the very deuce ? Answer me this, sir !" The peer had wound himself up into a state of virtuous indignation, as he mounted the stair, and determined to take the reprobate by storm.

"Well," replied Jack, smiling, "I don't quite see the use of answering suppositious questions ; but as you put them, I should say that a man who could do all that was a scamp of the first water."

"Where is Frederick Willerton ?" demanded the peer, folding his arms, and assuming a highly magisterial demeanour.

"How the deuce should I know?" replied Jack, raising his eyebrows.

"Young man," pursued Lord Hilton, becoming more magisterial every instant, "he has been altogether absent from his home for nearly a fortnight. Before he left, he was absent from his home a great deal more than one of his age should be. He neglected his studies; he kept abominably late hours; he excused his constant absences by stating that he was in your society."

"Then," replied Jack, perfectly unawed by the magisterial deportment, "he lied. I have not seen him since the night of his mother's ball."

"Am I to understand you, Mr. Hill, that you have not been to races together—that he has not passed night after night with you in dissipation for the last—I don't know how long; that—"

"You are to understand the plain meaning of plain English, my lord," interrupted Jack, looking the Earl as haughtily in the face as the Earl had ever looked any one in the face in his life. "I have already told you that I have not seen Mr. Frederick Willerton since his mother's ball. That was more than three weeks ago."

"Can—can you prove this?" faltered the Earl, his magisterial manner fall-

ing, however, with the magisterial words.

"Ask me if I *will* prove it, and I will tell you, my lord, that if you do not like to take my word, you may go elsewhere for your proof."

"Mr. Hill," said Lord Hilton, suddenly coming down from his pedestal, "his poor mother is breaking her heart. She is my only sister—and—and—"

"That little liar is your nephew?"

"I am ashamed to say he is. We believed his statements, and looked on you as his destroyer. We have done you an injustice, I feel—I know we have. Be generous. Return good for evil, and help his poor mother to find him."

"What has he been up to?" asked Jack.

Lord Hilton, now a humble suppliant before the man he had come to bully, gave a succinct account of what Master Fred had been "up to," not forgetting to mention the bracelets, ear-rings, and riding-habits, which figured in the young gentleman's account. "But," added he, by way of apology at the end, "I am now certain, and I shall assure Mrs. Willerton that you have had nothing to do with this."

Jack turned pale, and bit his lip. "Stop there," he said. "You came here, my lord, predisposed against me, and yet, somehow

or other, you have changed your opinion."

"It would be an affront to a gentleman to tell him you disbelieve him," replied the peer. "There is something in your manner, Mr. Hill, that—that I *more* than believe you, Mr. Hill, I—I—damn it! sir, if you were my own son, I should not feel more confidence in you," he cried.

"Wait till you hear all, my lord," said Jack, becoming serious. "On the evening of his mother's ball, I introduced young Wil-lerton, without thinking of any harm, to an actress—I suppose I must call her so—whom he was very anxious to know. I am very much afraid that she has had some hand in what you have told me."

"There is a woman in the case as plain as daylight."

"My lord," continued Jack, "blame me as you please for a foolish act, but do not credit me with all the consequences. How could I suppose that your nephew would make such a fool of himself?"

"Very true."

"And if I had not introduced him, do you think that he would not have made her acquaintance in some other way? She isn't so particular."

"Oh, she hasn't done much damage. A few hundred or so. But how he could

have required so many suits of clothes—”

“Oh! my lord,” interrupted Jack, “the world has changed since you were a young man, if you don’t know that there are tailors who put suits of clothes into the father’s bill, and ten pound notes into the son’s pocket. Do you think that your scamp ever wore, or *saw* the clothes credited to him? Not a bit of it! he had the money instead, and spent it on that—; but it’s not the *money* that I mind—his father is a rich man—it’s the disreputable way in which it was got; that’s the devil of it,” said Jack, bitterly.

Lord Hilton looked into his honest troubled face, and thought, “if Fred had spoken truth, and had really sought this man’s company, how differently he might have turned out.”

“Can you help us?” he said, after a pause.

“I can, and I will,” Jack replied. “The first thing is to find out if my suspicions are well founded—and, if they are, the next is to undo the mischief that I have caused—that’s easily done. If you will give me your address, my lord, you shall hear something definite to-morrow.”

Jack put on his hat, and walked with the Earl as far as his carriage. The latter drove off to Eaton Square, the former trudged to the Regency, and, having made certain inquiries of the stage-door keeper, returned to

his chambers and wrote the following note:—

“ My dear Sallie,

“ I met B. the other day coming from the City. He looked glum. I am afraid that the green-eyed monster was gnawing under his waistcoat. I am told that he has made a splendid spec in indigo—some say £80,000, some £20,000—split the difference and say £50,000. Lucky man, B. If I were a fair lady, I would never give him cause for uneasiness

“ That little fool whom I introduced to you at the theatre when last I saw you, has gone a mucker and come to grief. Mamma has stopped the supplies. He has been borrowing money of his tailors, and been found out. He will probably be whipped. Fancy B. borrowing money of his tailors!

“ *Au revoir*, Sallie. How does the Regency pay. Rather an expensive toy I should think. Lucky for B. that he made that spec.

“ Send me young Willerton's address.

“ Yours devotedly,

“ JACK HILL.”

To this came in reply, on superfine scented paper, headed with an elaborate monogram of entwined S's.

“ My dear Mr. Hill,

“ I don't know what you mean by green-eyed monsters being under Mr. B.'s waist-

coat. It's some of your nonsense. You know that nothing could come betwixt him and me. As for that young Willerton, I know nothing about him ; but my servant tells me he has left a kard with 6, Ulster Place, Bromton, written on it.

"In this burlesque Miss Gwindoline dances the break down after me, and gits the house. I wish I had taken your peace. Please let me see it again.

"Yours sincerely,

"SALLIE SPRING."

P.S.—The idear of his borrowing money of a taler. The little snob ! I shall cut him ded.—S. S.

Then Jack wrote :—

"My Lord,

"Mr. F. Willerton's address is 6, Ulster Place, Brompton. I was right, but the link it cut. Get him home.

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN HILL.

"The Rt. Hon. the Earl of Hilton."

CHAPTER V.

BOB BURRIDGER REPORTS PROGRESS.

IN the meantime Mr. Bob Burridger had received a note from his patron, in reply to the usual request for a "small advance on account," as he was on the verge of a great discovery respecting the still errant Place-more, which gave him to understand that it was time for him to draw his little game to a conclusion. The noble chairman of the Ecuadorian Irrigation and Agricultural Company (Limited) had seen a good deal of its secretary upon matters unconnected with the business of the Board, had introduced him to his daughters and the Willertons, and had appointed him oracle-in-chief, vice Champion and Burridger, superseded. It suited Blisset just now that the latter should be made to reveal the result of his investigations respecting the long-lost Placemore, and so Master Bob did not get his "small advance upon account," but in lieu thereof a peremptory order to attend Lord Hilton at his villa at Ventnor, and report progress that day week.

To the villa at Ventnor, to which the Earl and his daughters now returned, Abel Blisset was invited on the footing of his lordship's private secretary and confidential adviser, and in fulfilment of his promise that he should be present when Mr. Burridger unfolded his budget. Great was that young gentleman's astonishment when, upon being shown into Lord Hilton's study, he found his quondam entertainer at Cremorne seated in familiar conversation with the great man.

It was not one of the Earl's usual "fever days;" but he had fretted himself into a fever during the whole of the past week, puzzling, wondering, fearing what was to be the result; building castles in the air on the strength of Placemore being really dead, and moaning over their ruins when the fear that he could not suppress, crashed in and demolished the edifices of his hope. Patient Mary had had a sad time of it since her return. Every thing went wrong. Things with which Mr. Aylwarde had been as satisfied, as it was his nature to be, were detestable, horrid, vulgar, shabby, &c., to the new Earl of Hilton. He was snappish, even with his spoilt pet, Milly. Why had he given Burridger a whole week? Four days would have been quite enough; nay, three, two, one. Did Mr. Blisset think that he had found out anything at all?

What was the "great discovery?" In short, he fretted himself into one of his fever-fits out of its ordinary course, and was in no pleasant mood when Bob entered his sanctum half an hour late.

"Did I not order you, sir, to be here at three o'clock?" he demanded angrily, "in reply to Bob's fawning salutation.

"If it please your lordship," pleaded the delinquent, "the steamboat was late. I told the man I was coming to see your lordship on important business, and he said—he had the haudacity to say—"

"Bah! never mind what he said. Now you are here tell me what you have to report, and quickly," said Lord Hilton, throwing himself back in his chair.

But Bob began to favour the impatient peer with a series of winks and pantomimic gestures with his thumb, towards where Blisset was seated.

"Does the man mean to drive me mad?" he shouted. "What on earth are you grimacing about, fellow?"

"Oh, Lord! I mean my lord," cried the startled Bob, "I—I—only meant to say that it's particular, private and confidential, and before *him*—" and he winked again, indicating Blisset.

"There is nothing you can have to tell me

that Mr. Blisset may not hear," said Lord Hilton.

"Oh, if Mr. Burridger wishes me to retire," began the person indicated, rising leisurely from his chair.

"What the d—— is it to you what *he* wishes. I want you to stop. I am surprised at you, Mr. Blisset!" exclaimed the peer.

Whilst this conversation was going on, Mr. Robert Burridger stood in the middle of the room, with his hat and a red cotton pocket-handkerchief in one hand, and his bundle of papers in the other. The weather was hot, and he had been running to make up for lost time. The result was a good deal of perspiration, which was not checked by the asperity of his reception. Standing there, out of breath, trying in vain to mop his shining forehead with the red cotton implement aforesaid; but in his embarrassment, applying his hat or the papers for that purpose, and shifting all three from hand to hand, dropping them one by one in the vain endeavour, shuffling with his feet, and occasionally emitting sounds between a snort and a sob, he did not present an object likely to soothe the nerves of his irritable employer.

"If you do not go on with your confounded story this moment, sir," roared the Earl,

"I'll have you turned out of the house."

"Well, let a fellow sit down and arrange his papers then," whined Bob, forgetting his manners, in his fear of losing the long coveted reward.

"I beg your pardon. I forgot to ask you to be seated," Lord Hilton replied, more quietly. "I am not well to day, and, and—pray take a chair, and now *do* go on."

Bob obeyed—nothing loth so far as seating himself—spread out his papers on the table before him, and after a few preliminary hems and haws, went on as follows reading from his manuscript:—

"Favoured with the commands of his most right honourable Earlship of Hilton to make certain delicate and important investigations, the undersigned found himself almost overwhelmed by the honour which had been bestowed upon him; and resolved to rally round his worthy employer, and to leave not an effort unturned to give satisfaction as it was his earnest endeavour to, the undersigned—"

"In God's name what is the meaning of this gibberish?" cried the Earl. "Blisset can you—will you make him come to the point. Has he or has he not found Place-more? That's all I want to know. If he does not put that infernal paper away, I'll throw it out of window and him after it."

Blisset thus appealed to, made a gesture to pacify the angry peer ; but Bob, thinking it was directed against his cherished manuscript, clutched it to his bosom, and cried—

“ You dare touch my papers, Abel Blisset. I know your game ! You keep your hands off me.”

“ When I intend to lay them on you, Mr. Burridger, it will be quite useless your objecting ; till then please to keep your temper. What is that manuscript ? it seems a long one ?” said Blisset.

“ It is the true, unlacquered (perhaps Bob meant unvarnished) tale of all I have seen and done in your service,” replied Bob, addressing the Earl. “ It cost me no end of trouble to make it up, and it’s very hard—”

“—That you should not have the pleasure of reading it to his lordship,” interrupted the placid Blisset. “ I can quite understand an author’s feelings, Mr. Burridger ; but if you will be so good as to leave the papers here, I am sure his lordship will read them with the greatest interest at his leisure. It is true that he will lose that force and emphasis which only the author’s voice can give ; but he is not very well to-day, as he himself has informed you, and an exciting narrative, such as yours must necessarily be, would perhaps affect his nerves over much.

Could you not give his lordship, for the moment, a *précis* of this interesting narrative?"

"I haven't got any precees handy," replied Bob somewhat mollified. "It's all in my own handwriting."

"By a *précis*, I mean the substance of what you have written, Mr. Burridger," replied Blisset.

"Then you should have said so," answered Bob, glad of a chance of snubbing some one.

"It is quite useless arguing with such a blockhead," said the Earl, rising from his chair. "Now look here, sir, answer me ten questions in as many minutes, or I'll give you into custody for obtaining money under false pretences."

"You can't do that," said Bob, flaring up.

"I will."

"You'd better not try, I know the law."

"I do not pretend to be a lawyer," said Blisset, in his most tranquil tone and manner; "but it appears to me, Mr. Burridger, that you are in some slight peril. Did you not obtain fifteen pounds from his lordship some fortnight ago on the ground that you had actually found Augustus de Barkham Placemore?"

"And what then?" asked Bob, indignantly.

"Well, if you have not found him—"

"But I *have*," cried Bob, his temper getting the better of him.

"Ah—h," said Blisset, calmly, leaning back in his chair, "we have got one plain statement out of you, at any rate."

If looks could kill, Abel Blisset would have been a dead man that moment.

"Good God!" cried Lord Hilton, staggering to a seat. "I am a ruined man! Where is he, tell me at once, where is he?"

"My lord," pleaded Bob, fumbling with his beloved manuscript, "if you would only let me read—"

"I cannot bear it, Blisset! I—I cannot, indeed! Tell him I will give him twenty pounds for that cursed paper, over and above the reward, if he will only speak out. This suspense is killing me."

"You hear his lordship," said Blisset, "what do you say?"

"Say?" replied the delighted Bob, folding up his manuscript, "why, that I'm in the witness-box. Put your questions, and see how sharp I'll answer."

"You have found this Placemore?"

"I have."

"Where is he now?"

"Bermuda."

"In what condition of life?"

"A convict."

"Indeed! for what crime was he sentenced?"

"Forgery."

"For how long a term?"

"Fifteen years."

"From what date?"

"The first day of the Spring Assizes at York, in 1852—the 3rd of March, I think, but I am not certain of the date."

"And you are quite sure he is now at Bermuda?"

"He was sent there according to the Register in Pentonville Prison, in 1854, and he hasn't got his ticket-of-leave yet—leastwise, the Home Secretary says he hasn't," replied the witness, with a grin, "and he should know."

"Does your lordship wish me to ask him any further questions?" inquired Blisset.

"No," said the Earl, faintly; "yet one. Can all this be proved?"

"In those papers," replied Burridger, "I have a certified copy of the record of his trial, containing his conviction; of the judge's copy; of the calendar containing his sentence; of the warrant sending him to Pentonville, and order for his shipment to Bermuda. A certificate from the Under Secretary of State for the Home Department that no ticket-of-leave has been granted him,

and that he has not been returned in the lists of deceased convicts. If *that's* proof, I can prove it."

"It is conclusive—conclusive!" moaned the Earl.

"If you would only let a fellow read his statement?" pleaded Bob, in an injured tone.

"I will read it to-morrow," said the Earl, faintly. "Please to give me a little brandy from out of that case, Mr. Blisset; I feel faint, and—oh! Mr. Blisset, to think that he is found, and a convict! It is horrible—horrible! Blisset, why do you not say that it is horrible?"

"I feel deeply for your lordship's disappointment," replied Blisset, in a low voice; "but, perhaps—"

"Oh, it's no use talking about perhapses now. I felt how it would be. I was sure the fellow was alive, and if he behave well he will be free in a few months, with a ticket-of-leave. To think of the Chapel Hilton Estates going to a ticket-of-leave man, and I—a peer of the realm—left a beggar! It's horrible, Blisset—horrible! horrible!"

Blisset made no reply.

"He's a younger man than I am, and I have heard that these wretched convicts are always in good health, owing to the regular lives they are forced to lead," Lord Hilton

continued. "Besides, he may have a son, and then, even were I to survive him, I should be cut out. Blisset, why *don't* you speak to me?"

"My lord! before a stranger—" whispered Blisset, with a meaning glance towards where Burridger sat with his great red ears cocked, losing not a single word that passed. "Perhaps you would not object to—"

"— Oh, certainly," replied the Earl, in reply to the whispered suggestion that followed. "You must be hungry after your journey, Mr. Burridger. Do me the favour to ring that bell, and let me offer you some refreshment—and, and—you see what an invalid I am. The least excitement upsets me, and really the news you have brought— Well, well, I am not going to say any more, (this to the warning Blisset). There, now go and get some luncheon."

"But the accounts, my lord," cried Bob, flying again to his papers. "I have them all ready."

"I dare say—I dare say—*do* put those papers away. The rustling irritates me beyond measure. Mr. Blisset is good enough to act as my secretary for the present, and will settle with you before you go."

"And the twenty pound extra?"

"Yes—yes—yes. Cannot you see, man

alive, that I'm not fit to enter into such matters now. Pray leave me, both of you; or stay, give me your arm, Blisset, as far as my room. I must lay down awhile, or—oh, my head! my head!"

Bob Burridger retired in charge of the butler, and the Secretary led his almost fainting patron to his chamber with much care, beseeching him to be calm, not to hurry, &c., &c.; and having helped him to his couch, turned back to the room they had left, and seized upon Bob's manuscript much as a famished wild beast would seize upon its prey. His face, heretofore so pale and composed, was now crimson; the veins on his forehead now throbbed with emotion; the perspiration literally rained down upon the leaves, as he turned them over and over with hands which trembled so as almost to refuse the office. No writing could be clearer, but the words danced before his eyes, and the lines wove themselves into knots which his disordered mind could not disentangle. He seized the bottle containing brandy from the Earl's private case, but as hastily put it aside. "No," he muttered, *that won't do.* He then threw up the window-sash, and gasped rather than breathed the fresh sea breeze "My God!" he cried aloud, "if I had broken down like this

when I was questioning that little reptile!"

He returned to the manuscript, and reading it with more composure, came upon a name the sight of which struck him as with a blow, and seemed to tell him all he sought to know. "Well!" he muttered, after a long, deep sigh, "be it so. The little scoundrel has done his work well; very well. The temptation was a great one—almost worth the risk. There is no risk now, only a dead certainty. Ugh! if I had tried it and—but I must make the best of things as they are."

Abel Blisset, calm, prepossessed, and jocular as was his wont with his inferiors, when it suited his purpose, joined Bob Burridger at the luncheon, to which that gentleman was doing the fullest justice.

"Well, Bob," he said, helping himself to a glass of sherry and water, "that was a good twenty pound's worth you got out of me."

"So, so," replied Bob, leaning back in his chair with the air of a conqueror. "It helped me to get a clue to Placemore, but that was nothing. The rub was—"

"To identify him with the man who was convicted of forgery at York, under the name of Yates, eh, Bob?"

"You've been reading my paper, then," asked Bob, a little uneasily.

"I just glanced over it," replied Blisset, carelessly.

"Did the lord give you leave?"

"Of course. He has no secrets from me, Bob."

"Then, perhaps you know why he wanted to find out all about this Placemore?" inquired Bob, putting his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, and leering at his companion like an evil-minded magpie.

"Perhaps I do."

"Well, I say, old fellow, you know, fair play, you know, fair play. This job's mine. You sold it to me, and I paid you all square. You can't deny that.

"Of course not. I'm going to pay you all square, as you call it, again; and then there'll be an end of it."

Bob chuckled.

"Robert, my child," said Blisset, blandly, "if you think I do not know what is passing in your intelligent mind, you make a great mistake—you do, indeed. You have got a lot of money from Lord Hilton for finding Placemore, and now you are thinking how you can get something out of Placemore by introducing him to Lord Hilton, when an ungrateful country is tired of his services at Bermuda. I am glad to see that you can blush, Bob; I had almost feared that you

had lost that faculty. It is a good thing when a young man of your years, and practices, can blush."

"Blushing be——"

"No, Bob, no. Remember you are in a gentleman's house. There are ladies at hand who might not like to hear you swear."

"You mind your own business, and leave me to mind mine," replied Bob, in a sulky tone.

"It is the privilege of age and experience to offer advice to youth, Bob Burridger," said Blisset, with provoking coolness, "and my advice to you is to be content with what you've got, and leave Placemore, or Yates, or whatever else you please to call him, alone. Much as you have found out, *I know more*, and again I say, leave him alone." There was an evil light in the speaker's eyes as he thus delivered himself. Bob Burridger remembered it afterwards with a shudder, but for the present he only thought to himself that as this was the man who had to audit his accounts, he might as well conciliate him.

"Let him alone? Of course I shall; ha, ha, I was only chaffing. Have a glass of claret?" The lordly air with which Bob passed the bottle would have done credit to an alderman entertaining a poor relation. "And I say, look here," he continued, "about those accounts. It was you that put

me up to rigging them. You can't deny that. You've got your little game here, old fellow. You wouldn't like me to spoil that. If you was to go cutting down my accounts after putting me up to rig them, why—"

"Well?"

"Why, I should tell his lordship, and he—"

"Would refuse to believe you, and authorise me to kick you down stairs, which I should do with the greatest pleasure," said Blisset; "but spare yourself all anxiety on this point. My instructions are to pay your bill, not to tax it."

"Well, I'm sure it's not too much, considering all the trouble I've had," Bob whined. "It took me a day and a night to make up that report which he wouldn't let me read, and though I say it that has come out as Dickens, or—or the *London Journal*, I don't mind telling you, Blisset, because you're a friend," he continued, confidentially, "it was practising to spout it properly before the looking-glass that made me late for the first boat."

"I will try and do you justice when I read it to him to-morrow," said the other.

"Do you live here, then?"

"For the present."

"I suppose you would not like to say how it is that you've got so thick with his lordship

all of a sudden?" asked Bob, with his magpie leer.

"That is his lordship's business and mine," replied Blisset, "but as you are so interested in my welfare, I will tell you that I have left my old employment, and am on a fair way to be made a rich man by the concession upon which you once refused to advance me five pounds."

"The deuce!"

"Yes, the shares are now at seven and a half premium, and rising. But if you are thinking of getting away by to-night's boat, you'd better come and get your cheque."

They adjourned to the Earl's study, where the cheque was duly filled up, to Bob's intense delight, and carried up to the Earl's room by Blisset to be signed; Bob employing the interim by a farewell perusal of his master-piece.

"I'm glad you have come to me, Blisset," said Lord Hilton in a feeble voice, "I could not sleep, thinking over this bad business, and an idea has struck me that all hope is not quite lost, even now. Is it not a fact that when a man is found guilty of such a crime as forgery, his landed estate reverts to the crown?"

"I believe so, my lord."

"And that the crown almost always gives

it to the next heir. The Government would never think of keeping Chapel Hilton from me, Blisset?"

"I do not pretend to know anything about law," he replied, "but is it not also true that when a man has suffered his punishment, he is as though he had not been convicted."

"I am afraid you're right, Blisset," moaned the Earl, sinking back upon his pillows. "It comes to this then," he continued, after a pause, "that if Mrs. Eagleton be living at the time when that scoundrel gets his liberty, I lose all chance. It is horrible—horrible! Confound it, man, have you not a word to say to me in all this trouble?"

"If it would not excite you too much, I have a most important communication to make," replied Blisset, drawing a chair close to the Earl's bed-side.

"Say on; you cannot make me worse than I am."

"I told you, my lord, when first you did me the honour to confide in me respecting this Placemore, that there was a point at which Mr. Burridger's investigations might stop, and where my knowledge on the subject might commence."

"You did; but the fellow has found out everything."

"Not quite 'everything.'"

"What matter minor particulars? He has evidently traced the man, and tells us where he is."

"Where he was, my lord."

"What do you mean, Blisset?"

"My lord, Mr. Burridger is a very sharp young man, and would make an excellent detective. He has found out, how cleverly you will no doubt learn in the papers he has left, that Placemore was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years' transportation; but I could have told you all that."

"Then in Heaven's name why did you not do so?"

"Because I could not prove it. I am not quite correct in stating that I 'knew' it. I had strong suspicions that a man whom I had known as Placemore, was one whom I had heard of under another name; but I had no means of certifying the one with the other. Mr. Burridger has supplied the missing link, and all the rest is clear."

"Ah! clear enough to my cost," sighed Earl Hilton.

"Wait awhile. Mr. Burridger is a clever young man; but, like some other clever young men, he overrates his cleverness. He thinks that because this Placemore, or Yates as he was called, was sent to Bermuda, and has not obtained a ticket-of-leave, or been returned as

dead from thence, that he must be there now. It did not occur to him to inquire after convicts *who had escaped*."

"Give me a dose from that bottle, the square one, Blisset, quick ; and go on, go on."

"Yates and a man named Emlin escaped from the hulks at Bermuda some seven or eight years ago, when Mr. Burridger was probably at school. I wondered your lordship did not remember the case : the papers were full of it, for the escape was an extraordinary one."

"I don't remember anything about it ; but go on, go on."

"Great endeavours were made to recapture them, and they were traced as far as Maracaibo in Venezuela, where the boat in which they had left Bermuda was found. There all clue ceased."

"Then the villain is at large, and may turn up any day !"

"Calm yourself, my lord," said Abel Blisset, "and have no more fear. Chapel Hilton is yours. Placemore will never trouble you, or any one else. He died at Panama six years ago !"

CHAPTER VI.

BY THE SAD SEA WAVES.

WHEN painters and sculptors desire to personify Justice, they present her in the form of a woman, and are obliged to place a bandage over her eyes for fear she should cheat. I am aware that this is not the popular explanation of such blind-folding, but never mind. There are reasons *and* reasons; and the reasons we give are not always the reasons upon which we act. There is not one woman in a hundred who can take a cause or a character as a whole, and come to a just conclusion upon it. The ninety-and-nine seize with wonderous quickness upon some point, irrelevant generally, to the main issue, by the light of which it is prejudged. They will take up a grain of gold, and utterly ignoring the mass of pestilent refuse from which it has been obtained, bid you triumphantly to "look at that!" On the other hand, when the prejudice has set the other way, it is no use to produce nugget after nugget of pure metal. They will look at

nothing but the dirt that has been washed therefrom. No! Justice, *en femme*, gives the painter and the sculptor opportunities for graceful outline and flowing draperies; but I prefer my Lord the Queen's Justice, whose outline is *not* graceful, and the folds of whose drapery do *not* fold in an artistic manner. We have not so much need to tie a bandage over his eyes.

Justice, *en femme*, sat in judgment upon our good-for-nothing, and convicted him of treasons, felonies, and misdemeanours. If the Court assembled in Mrs. Willerton's boudoir had had power to pass sentence on him, it would have gone hard with Jack. It was nothing that he had been instrumental in bringing the lost black sheep back to the fold. Nothing that the lost black sheep was the only witness against him, and that he was a convicted liar. It was admitted that Jack had introduced him to that "dreadful creature"—the only name by which the fascinating Miss Sallie Spring was known in Eaton Square—and the rest followed as a matter of course: verdict, that they—Jack and the Spring—are in league to plunder the poor innocent. That they had divided the spoil—Jack and the "dreadful creature"—and he had only delivered up the dear lamb when his black fleece had been tho-

roughly sheared. The little black sheep came home, and brought his little black tale of sorrow—or part of it—behind him. He was well content to find excuses for his conduct, ready cut and dried, awaiting him. It saved trouble.

“Well, hang it all!” he replied, to the very faint chiding with which his fond, foolish mother greeted him, “the governor should have given me a good allowance, and let me live like other fellows. I ain’t going to let other fellows have the pull of me.”

Lord Hilton stood up for Jack, and declared that he had acted like a gentleman. He might as well have told his sister, and her echo “dearest Matilda,” that the Prince of Darkness was a gentleman! Spencer Wilerton heard what his brother-in-law and his son had to say—when the time came to say it—from another point of view. Mary and Constance held their tongues, satisfied with what had happened; but pretty, spoilt Milly insisted upon being taken to “the Regency” to see Miss Sallie Spring; and it was no use telling her that she was in mourning for the late Lord Hilton, and could not, in common decency, appear in a place of amusement so soon after his death.

“I never saw the tiresome old man in my life!” she said, with a pretty pout, “and

I'm sure *I* don't mean to wear this horrid black when we go back to the sea-side!"

Pass we over the meeting between the noble-hearted statesman and his son. The ancient dramatists were right when they dropped the curtain over the agony of a hero. When the black sheep—who by the way had primed himself for the encounter with half a bottle of brandy—swaggered out of the room, the father's head which had ever been held so high before friend or foe, fell on his desk, and—well, let us drop the curtain.

The little black sheep told his dam, with much satisfaction, that he had "had it out with the governor, and given him a bit of his mind," whereupon he begged five sovereigns, and went his way, having promised faithfully to come back for dinner.

I need scarcely say that he did not go to Jack Hill, and did not keep his word.

As Beckwith became stronger, and was permitted to talk, Jack became more and more puzzled about him. Here was a man who affected to feel the utmost contempt for money *as* money; who spoke with enthusiasm of all manly sports, and had ardently at one time been an adept in most of them, slaving away in a miserable London attic, making an income amply sufficient to enable him to enjoy the amusements he loved, and

yet denying himself every recreation, and fretting to return to his work. Jack could not make him out.

Allowing for the ravages of illness, he was, when Jack first saw him, a man of from thirty-five to forty years ; tall and once robust. His features, when in repose, were of almost womanly beauty and refinement, but something had stamped a hard, callous expression upon his face which never belonged to it in other years. This look melted away as he slept, and when Jack watched his calm, gentle face, saw the dog curled up so comfortably under his arm, and the bird perched on his pillow, his heart smote him for the hard things he had repeated of his unknown neighbour.

Do not suppose that these two lived together like a Damon and Pythias. Many a battle royal was fought ; many a hard word flung backwards and forwards—the *casus belli* being always the doctor's absolute desire that Beckwith was on no account to be allowed to put pen to paper, and Jack's determination to work for both.

"You mind your own bis !" was Jack's refrain, "your bis is to get well. It's my bis to attend to your other bis, which you can't mind just now."

"It's well that you have no bis of your

own to mind," said Beckwith, falling back upon his pillows.

Jack looked at him with a queer smile, but said nothing. To Beckwith, he was still the lucky idle dog with a small fortune payable on quarter-day.

"I can't make you out, old man," said Jack, laying down his pen, having just finished an article for the *Censor*. "Why the deuce are you in such a fuss about getting to work again? You said just now you hated work."

"I must work."

"All in good time; but you can't spend, living as you do, a quarter of what you make, and —" Jack paused, he did not like to say what was on his mind.

It was growing dark, and Jack could not see the expression that passed over Beckwith's face as he thus spoke. He paused, half sorry that he had touched the subject, and was about to change it, when Beckwith replied, in a low sad voice out of the deepening twilight.

"When I was about your age, Hill; or perhaps younger, I fastened a mill-stone round my neck. If I do not struggle hard, it will sink me and — and others."

Jack thought of his own Oxford debts, and gave vent to his feelings in an involuntary whistle.

"I know what debt is," he said after a pause, "but cheer up, old man, you'll pull through in no time at the rate you're going; only no one can expect you to work now."

The hard cynical smile darkened on the invalid's face; but he made no reply.

This conversation took place a few days after Lord Hilton's visit, and in a few days more the doctor took leave of his patient, saying —

"Now you get along to the sea-side for three weeks, and when you come back you may do as you like."

Beckwith declared that this would be utterly impossible. He must stay in London, and get to work again. Jack did not contradict him but went out; and in two hours returned, saying that he had made all the necessary arrangements. The *Censor* people were bricks. They would telegraph what subjects they wanted articles upon, on every Wednesday, and the "copy" could be sent by post the following night. It was all right. Polly Secundus would pack up for both, and they would start the following day. Beckwith felt his breath taken away by these rapid arrangements, and at last began to expostulate against them; but it was no use.

"You are going to the Isle of Wight with me to-morrow like a good child," said the

good-for-nothing decisively. "You are going to gather shells on the shore, and you may chuck them where you like afterwards. You are going to breathe the briney, and lift up your pecker. Inshallah! I have said it."

About this time, the initiated began to talk about a new hand that they had got on the *Censor*, who schooled Cabinet ministers, bishops and governors, and settled the questions which had vexed generations of statesmen, economists and divines, with an off-hand coolness and assumption of superiority, which was almost sublime; but they missed certain scholarly, calmly reasoned essays, in which points were implied more strongly than the "new hand" could put them in his most trenchant language. The public—who love strong meat—thought the paper had improved. It certainly sold better than before, and if the Editor had telegraphed down to the Isle of Wight for an article upon the cultivation of cotton in the moon, he would have had one by return of post. The "new hand" was not diffident.

"What the deuce do you know about German politics?" said Beckwith, somewhat angrily, one day, when the telegram arrived, and Jack set to work, nothing daunted upon that perplexing question.

"Nothing at all," he replied, with one of

his jolly laughs—"that's why I'm going to write a slashing article about them. A little knowledge you know, old man, is a dangerous thing. I've no knowledge at all on this subject, so I'm all right. When you write about Germans and Germany, write what no one can understand and it will pass for wisdom—especially when it is translated."

So he corrected Bismark on all points, and set the world to rights.

By this time Spencer Willerton had arrived with his yacht, "The Kelpie," in the Solent; and his wife and son, accompanied by "dearest Matilda" and her daughter, were settled in the villa which Lord Hilton had taken for them at Cowes. Mrs. Willerton detested the sea—that is to say, sailing upon it—and of course her dearest Matilda detested it equally. Many a time did the pair shake their heads and sigh over the selfishness of that creature Man; especially as illustrated by the conduct of the Right Hon. Spencer, in spending about as much on his yacht as his wife spent for him on her dress and entertainments.

We know that the visit of the Willerton party to the Isle of Wight was arranged some time before any of its members had made the acquaintance of Mr. Hill. They did not go there after him. Whether he did, or did not go there after some of them is another ques-

tion. Certain it is that Dr. James fully approved of his taking Beckwith to Cowes for the restoration of his health, and equally true that during the first days of the latter's illness, whilst watching beside his bed in the quiet hours of the night, the faces of Mary Aylwarde and Constance Conway, mingled together as at first, had filled the mind's eye of our good-for-nothing, and troubled his thoughts. He knew that the former lived at Ventnor, and this may account for his having selected Cowes, of all the watering places on the South Coast, for the honour of a visit. When he found out—as of course he could not help doing—that the latter was living within a stone's throw of his lodgings, he felt no great surprise, so thoroughly had he accustomed himself to associate the two girls together.

He found it out through Master Fred, who accosted him one day upon the pier in a free and easy way, as though nothing had passed to interrupt their acquaintance, and was much surprised when Jack turned his back upon him, and, as Miss Spring would write, cut him “ded.” Fred told his mother whom he had met; but refrained from stating the sort of reception he had been given. The poor lady deeming that the tempter had come again after her little black sheep, rushed

off in despair and a poney-chaise to her brother, who pho-phoed her fears, and asked Jack to dinner. At dinner, Jack met Spencer Willerton, who invited him to a cruize in the "Kelpie," round the island. To this water party the Ladies Aylwarde and Constance Conway, who did not share her mother's detestation of the sea, were also bidden and so—

Well, so it happened, that at breakfast one morning, after they had been settled about a fortnight in their lodgings, Beckwith laid down his knife and fork, and apropos of nothing, said

"Jack, it has occurred to me that you are making a fool of yourself."

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"What I say. I have observed you lately in white waistcoats, and trousers of unwonted hue. You came home yesterday on a horse, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that you went out on one. Your last article in the *Censor* was not worth printing, and would not have been printed if we were not in the silly season."

"I don't see any folly in dressing like a gentleman, Beckwith, or in taking the amusements of one," replied Jack, somewhat tartly, "and as for what I write—that's the editor's business, and not your's."

"Oh, certainly, if you take it in that way."

"Did I say you were making a fool of yourself, because you refused Lord Hilton's invitation, and prefer going out all night in stinking fishing-smacks to sailing in Mr. Willerton's yacht, as you have often been asked to do as my friend? No, I tried to argue you out of your unsociable ways; and, finding it no good, left you to them. I chose to be sociable, or—if you please so to call it—to play the fool. Leave me to do so, if I like. It's no business of your's."

"I am sorry that I spoke, Jack. I did not think it had gone so far," replied Beckwith.

"What had gone so far?" asked Jack, turning very red.

"That which makes you take up my words—spoken in jest—as you have done. I will say no more. Let us drop the subject, please."

"I don't please to drop it, till you have told me what you mean."

"I tell you I am sorry I broached the subject, Hill. Is not that enough? To continue it, would be to seek confidences which you don't seem inclined to give me. Why should you? Let it be as you say. Go your way, and leave me to go mine."

The two had had many a spar together, but their differences had never taken so bitter a turn. *Dove la donna?* When men, who have been as much to each other as Hill and

Beckwith, exchange cross words, and crosser looks, be sure that a woman has come between them. Where was the woman? She was walking up and down the lawn of Lord Hilton's villa, constantly looking at her watch to see if it was yet twelve o'clock; and if that timepiece had beaten half as fast as did her heart at the sound made by any passing horse, it would have been at least half an hour fast. As it was, it wanted twenty minutes of mid-day. "The woman" was treated as a child a few mouths ago—a child with a sprained wrist, who held that unchild-like conversation with Alice Bloxam on the banks of the Southerton brook—who had raised that wild, heart-broken cry of "My father! my father! Oh, my father!" on the night of her first ball. A child no more. Time had rendered it no longer possible to deny her the outward trappings of womanhood, and something had grown on her heart which made her a woman indeed. So that when *the* horse's hoofs rang on the road, and Jack Hill's white hat was seen, bobbing up and down over the fence, precisely as the clock struck twelve, she ran away and hid herself.

"Don't you think, my dear Hilton," said Mrs. Willerton, one day to her brother, "that it would be as well not to encourage that Mr.

Hill so much. Of course you are entitled to your opinion about him, and he *may* be all you say ; but really, people will begin to talk if he is seen so often with Mary and Amelia."

"Oh, nonsense."

"You may call it nonsense if you like. They are your daughters, not mine. I have great confidence in Mary, and fully believe she would not do a foolish thing ; but dear Milly, with her attractions, and at her impulsive and inexperienced age, you should really be more careful."

"You must be quite blind, Gertrude, to talk like that," replied the Earl. "Did you not notice the attentions young Winthorpe paid her whenever they met last season. He is in Scotland shooting now, or he would be here ; and from a hint he let fall before I came in for my title, I have good reasons to think that I shall see my child a marchioness before the new year."

"Winthorpe is said to be very wild," remarked his sister, in a musing tone.

"He has a hundred and twenty thousand a year, and he does not play. He will make Milly an excellent husband. I have a great regard for Hill. I think him a most amusing fellow, but as a son-in-law ! my dear Gertrude, how could you ever suggest such a possibility ?"

"Do you think Milly likes the Marquis?"

"I am sure she does.

The fond father was not wrong. Unfortunately in these "fast" days, the reputation of being "very wild" does a young man more good than harm. As soon as pretty Milly heard that the Marquis of Winthorpe was a "sad young man," (why people who live only to amuse themselves, and at two-and-twenty with about three hundred pounds a-day to spend, manage to do so, are called "sad," I don't know) she instantly contrived that he should be introduced to her, with the result above indicated. The happy man—sad, we will hope, no longer—was obliged to go to Scotland, because his shooting parties there had been made up before a few common-place words and a strain of music gave him the right to clasp Milly's slender waist, and to plunge with her into the middle of a waltz. Milly had caught the great *parti* of the season. Afraid of Jack Hill? The idea!

They never thought of poor little Con. She was a child to them, *malgré* her long frocks, and so she was permitted to spend day after day with her friend Mary Aylwarde, to her mother's great relief. For, somehow, a cloud had come between these two. Mrs. Conway, with a lace pocket-handkerchief to her eyes, had assured her "dearest Ger-

trude" that she could not make out what had come over the child. "She shuns me as though I were her worst enemy, and you know the sacrifices I have made for her," wept the unhappy parent. Dearest Gertrude assured her friend that it was all fancy, that the girl naturally sought the society of young people, that Mary Aylwarde was the best of companions for her, &c.; but "dearest Matilda" was not satisfied.

Other things occurred to trouble her. Her maid, a Devonshire girl of usually dull but obedient disposition, had made a sudden and unprovoked attack upon her gentle mistress. Had sprung at her like a tiger, on being scolded for some fault, had shaken her, beaten her head against the bed-post, kicked her, and, hypocrite as she was, had shouted "help" and "murder" the while. Mrs. Willerton, aroused by the cries, had hastened to her guest's room, and there found her all but unconscious, with her delicate white arms all over red marks, where the strong-handed delinquent had seized her.

Not a word did the offender say whilst the poor lady narrated her bad conduct. She stood sullenly apart, smoothing her hair, which appeared had come down during the struggle, and when Mrs. Willerton told her that she ought to be ashamed of herself, only replied :

"That's as it may be. It's no good my saying anything here. You won't believe me against her; but I warn her not to say it again to any lady that asks my character—that's all. Miss Constance saw what was done, and *she* won't tell lies."

"You wicked girl!" replied her mistress; "you know Miss Constance was not here. Does not this show what a false creature she is?" This to the sympathizing Gertrude.

"She wasn't here, I'll allow," replied the maid, "but she was in her own room, and the door was open."

Mrs. Conway flushed crimson at this statement, and said nothing in reply. When she came down to dinner, looking more than usually fragile and refined, she told her friend, to that lady's great surprise, that the girl had begged pardon, and been forgiven.

"You see, my dearest Gertrude, the poor thing's temper got the better of her, but it was all over in a minute, and she is *so* repentant. Besides, if I were to dismiss her she would be ruined, and she is really very useful to me. What *should* I do with a new servant who did not know where to find my things?"

It was remarked in the housekeeper's room that the erring maid went to church the next Sunday in a silk dress, which her mistress

had only worn once. She had certainly been entirely forgiven.

"You spoil that girl, indeed you do, Matilda," said Mrs. Willerton, when this important fact was made known to her (of course by her own maid, who was jealous of the new dress); "you almost encourage her to behave badly."

"Oh dear, dear, I dare say I am wrong," replied the poor lady, "but what is a helpless creature like me to do? I am so dependent upon them all."

This took place some days before little Con had run away at the sight of Jack's hat. He passed a most pleasant day, and ruined one of the brand new pair of trousers which had attracted Beckwith's attention in gathering ferns and flowers for the girls during their rambles. What an age seemed to him to have passed since the cricket match, when he had led Constance by the hand like a child, to see the wickets, and had talked to her of her father. And how changed she was! How pretty she had become. She looked pretty enough at Mrs. Willerton's ball; but now, was it the sea air or what, that had brought the life, as it were, into her face? Poor little Con! He did not know that the life went out of it when it was turned homewards. If he could only have

seen her on that horrid afternoon, when her mother's maid was forgiven, and heard amidst her sobs, that heart-rending cry, "My father, my father—oh! my father!"

And Jack? Had anything jumped into his heart? Not yet, I think. The three girls were one to him. He sought and liked them all pretty equally. If he had any leaning towards one more than another, it was for Mary. She was so quiet, so sensible, so thoroughly thorough-bred. He enjoyed his tilts with Milly, who affected to hold his literary efforts in utter scorn; he liked to look round and find little Con's great eyes fixed on him in admiration, whilst he was laying down the law, and regarded them as a pair of pretty simpletons. But Mary's praise or blame was taken in a very different light.

He rode home to Cowes in thorough good humour with himself and all mankind, and found Beckwith with a guest—a tall, quaint, dried-up man, who smoked a large number of very good cheroots and talked, not much, but very sensibly about shooting and other sports in the East, till a late hour.

"You don't mind his coming now and then to have a jaw with me?" asked Beckwith, when the guest had departed.

"Of course not; how can you ask. He seems a capital fellow."

"He is what he seems."

"By the way you introduced me to him, but forgot to do the other thing."

"I beg your pardon, didn't I? Well, his name is Andrew Standring. He has lived for many years at Smyrna. I met him there when—some years ago."

"Standring—Standring," said Jack, "I know that name. Has he any relations in London?"

"I do not think he has any relations, or anyone who cares for him, anywhere," replied Beckwith, in that sad sweet voice that was peculiar to him when speaking seriously. "He is like myself, all alone in the world."

"Look here, old man," said Jack, laying his hand on his friend's shoulder, "I was beastly grumpy this morning. You ain't offended, are you? I didn't mean it. You ain't angry, now, are you?"

"I never can be angry with you, Jack; only—"

"Only what?"

"Only this," replied Beckwith, his face glowing, with earnestness. "For God's sake take care. You are getting on splendidly now. For God's sake don't give yourself back to misery, for the sake of a girl who will jilt you."

"You miserable old cynic!" said

Jack, laughing, "who's going to jilt me?"

"I don't know. They are all alike. You know you're spooning one of those girls, Jack, and when she comes out false, *as she will*, you will take seven hundred devils worse than any you ever were a slave to before."

He spoke with an earnestness that almost cowed Jack.

"Do you suppose that there is not one good woman in the whole world, Beckwith?" he asked.

"Find her, and then go and live together on a desert island. That's your only chance."

"Then you think there is no such thing as a faithful wife?"

"Bah! I don't speak of faithfulness in its common meaning. I don't speak of men deceivers. I speak of women. Wherever there are two women together, there's misery for any man who is bound to either of them."

"Bah! to you, my dear fellow. It's us men who bring misery to women in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred."

"I entirely disagree with you. I don't believe that one woman in five hundred goes to the bad in any way you please, without another woman being the cause of it."

"You speak bitterly of the sex."

"I have cause to do so. Listen. A very dear friend of mine—a man who had some

good points about him, as even his enemies admitted—married a girl whom he loved dearly, and, God helping him, determined to make a happy wife. And happy she would have been. She was young, and very inexperienced, and he helped to guide her as best he could. For a time they were very happy; but a parcel of women got round her, and persuaded her that her husband's hints were dictation; that his advice was interference, and told her that she should resent both, and be absolute mistress—that was their word—in her house. So she had been, and never thought that she had been otherwise till those busybodies interfered. Amongst them was a woman who, God knows how, had married an eminent artist. A cold, calculating woman of the world, with about as much refinement in her as a cuttle-fish; but her exterior was presentable, and she was a capital housekeeper. When her husband came up from his work in his studio, he found everything quiet, orderly, and proper. He had no household cares or vexations, and, as it is only in novels that husbands want artistically-minded wives, he was happy with his vulgar, but clever spouse. She put him forward as a model of what a husband should be, and my friend, in his ill-regulated home was expected to be the same. Naturally

enough, when he came home, and found everything in a confusion, he expostulated. That was interference. He tried to set things right. That was dictation. He saw his wife in incessant wrangles with servants, and did his best to pacify all parties. Worse and worse. He gave in, and refused to act one way or the other. His wife demanded to be absolute in her house, and he let her be so, for peace sake, till, with her ignorance and her temper, she made it a perfect Hell to him. He spent his time elsewhere—innocently enough—and then jealousy came in. Even his children—but that we must not talk about. The wrong was too awful! Is it to be wondered at that a man so treated went astray? that those who knew him once a pleasant, happy fellow, and who saw the wreck he was made, should cry out against women's wrongs towards women?"

"That is one case."

"One case! It's one case repeated, like the stamp on a coin, fifty thousand times."

"Hang it, man!" cried Jack, "all girls that marry are not such little fools as your friend's wife was."

"I have given you only one example of one moving cause. There are a dozen others. Women teach women to be jealous, to be extravagant, to seek for admiration, to em-

broil their husbands with their family and friends. On every one of the devil's roads leading to a breach of the Seventh Commandment—believe me, Jack—there is a woman's hand as the guide-post. And when we think that our children, our dear little innocent babies, are subjected to such guidance—ah! it won't do to think of that," muttered Beckwith, between his clenched teeth.

"Did you read my article in the last paper but one, about children's evidence?" asked Jack, not sorry of a chance to change the conversation.

"Yes, and I fully concur in every word you said. Children can be made to believe that they have heard or seen anything. Your illustrations were very good."

The article in question was founded on arguments which Jack had ventilated to Mrs. Conway at the Willerton ball, and, therefore, I need not recapitulate them. It was a clever piece of argument enough, but hardly merited being read over and over and over again, as Constance Conway read it. A serious article, without one spice of Jack's usual dash and flippancy in it, but not one which should make a young girl fling herself upon her knees, and pray with streaming eyes that God would forgive and guide her.

CHAPTER VII.

JACK IS "JACK" AT VENTNOR.

IF anyone had sought Lord Hilton, and complained that his lawyer had not raised five and twenty thousand pounds for him on a reversionary interest at twenty-four hour's notice, that nobleman would probably have assumed his high, magisterial air, and said,

"My dear sir! five and twenty thousand pounds is a large sum of money. People do not lend five and twenty thousand pounds, without a good deal of consideration and enquiry. There are lawyers to be consulted, titles to be examined, deeds drawn up, and all that sort of thing, you know. Besides, at this time of the year everybody is out of town. You must be reasonable, and wait." But in his own case, no such considerations entered his mind. As soon as he heard that Placemore was dead, he telegraphed for Mr. Champion to come to him immediately. The message found the lawyer enjoying himself with his family at Scarborough, and thinking that his client must be at least on his death bed, or in some more than usually serious

scrape, obeyed it. He was not best pleased with my lord when the cause of this summons was made known, and my lord was furious with him when he stated that a lender of five and twenty thousand pounds, upon the reversion of the Chapel Hilton Estate, would require something more than the mere word of Mr. Abel Blisset that the more immediate reversioner was dead.

And how came Abel Blisset to know that Algernon de Barkham Placemore had died at Panama, six years ago? By the mearest accident. He had visited that city—he told Lord Hilton—on business, for a firm at Callao, with which he was engaged at the time, and heard one morning that the body of an Englishman had been found on the sea-shore. Naturally enough he went to see the remains of his dead—some said murdered—countryman, and found them so frightfully mutilated by the land-crabs, as to be beyond identification so far as the features went. By the clothes and some papers found in his pockets, however, the deceased was recognised as a man who had gone about a night or two before, from drinking-shop to drinking-shop, with a bottle of brandy in one hand and a revolver in the other, compelling all he met to drink with him, and abusing them the while, as a set of skunks unworthy of such

an honour, as he was a British Baronet, and had a grand estate called Placemore Hall. This was treated as the bragadoccio of a drunkard, the more especially when it was clearly proved, in the investigation which our consul held, that his name was Yates, and that he was an escaped convict. Until Mr. Blisset saw the advertisement we know of, it mattered nothing to him, who or what the dead man really was. Then his suspicions took form, and when the astute Burridger had proved that the convict Yates and Placemore were one and the same person, the whole affair was clear.

The tone and manner in which Blisset seemed to depreciate the value of his information, gave double value to it. "Not being a lawyer," he said, when his narrative was concluded, "I cannot say what weight my evidence may have in a court of law: but, morally speaking, I am as convinced that it was Placemore as that I sit here now."

The advertisement having borne much good fruit after all, its suggestive oracle, Lilly, was reinstated, and made a confident anew by his sanguine friend, and he, having, as we know, been a consul, instantly solved the difficulty.

"Lord, bless my soul!" exclaimed the little man, "the thing's as easy as A.B.C. Go to

the Registrar-General, and ask to see the return of deaths from the Consulate of Panama. Go to the Foreign Office and ask for a copy of the Consul's report about this murder. Put the two together, and what else do you want?"

Well the lawyers did want something else, confound them! (Lord Hilton loquitor). When a capitalist was found willing to advance the required sum, the counsel engaged to advise on title, after having been at last satisfied that Placemore was Yates, and that Yates was dead; required proof that he had never had a son or sons, or that if he had, that such son or sons had died unmarried. Until this were done not a half-penny could be safely advanced.

These objections Lord Hilton took as personal insults to himself. "Does the scoundrel, (*i.e.* the, to him, unknown negociator of the loan) think I want to rob him? Who the deuce is to prove that the villain (Placemore to wit) did not marry a dozen wives and have as many brats? Champion ought to be ashamed of himself for submitting to such nonsense."

But such nonsense had to be submitted to, and the Earl of Hilton found himself a poorer man, with all his expectations, than Bertram Aylwarde had been for many a year. Cre-

ditors who had left him at peace out of sheer hopelessness as a simple gentleman, would not understand that his peerage did not carry with it the means of paying for his coronet, and the fact that he had set up a grand yellow barouche in lieu of the humble poney phaeton which had served him in other days, combined with similar outward signs of wealth, sported on the strength of his election as Chairman of the Ecuadorian Irrigation Company, did not mend matters.

It vexed him greatly to get no help in his new difficulty from Blisset. The new oracle in chief had been indeed unusually moved when he learned the necessity of proving that Placemore had died childless; but he made no suggestion or effort to supply what was wanting. His acquaintance with the man, he observed, had really been so slight, &c., and his present occupations engrossed so much of his time, &c. Perhaps Mr. Burridger, who had been so successful, might be employed with advantage. All would come right in time, and for the present—if he might be so very bold—as the promotion money of the Ecuadorian Irrigation Company would be payable in a few days, he should esteem himself most honoured if the Earl would make him his banker for (say) a couple of thousand pounds until something could be settled.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Lord Hilton, as he read the letter containing this offer "Blisset is the best fellow in the world!"

There was one of his lordship's household who did not join in this sentiment, and that was Milly. The spoilt beauty could not bring herself to be commonly civil to Blisset, even whilst he was her father's guest, and lost no opportunity of giving him her bad word.

"For shame, for shame, my dear child!" the Earl would reply, to some of her bitter sallies. "I am sure Mr. Blisset does not deserve this from you. His conduct towards you has always been most attentive and respectful."

"That's just it, papa. I hate his cat-like submissive ways! How dare he be civil to me, when I am so rude—purposely rude—to him? I cannot bear him!"

Then the Earl got angry, said a good many things he did not mean, and made a good many threats he had no intention of carrying out; and so, of course, pretty Milly got the best of it, as any woman can with an angry man.

Mary, who was always striving in her quiet way to keep the peace, took a different line.

"I don't like Mr. Blisset, dear," she said, one day, "and that is just the reason why I will never give him an excuse to say that I

cannot behave like a gentlewoman in my father's house."

"Dearest Mary!" cried her sister, in a pleading tone, altogether strange to her, "I'm very sorry! I don't know what it is. He looks at me so, I—I'm half afraid of him!"

"Nonsense, child!"

"I cannot help it, Mary—I can't, indeed. Do you remember that snake we saw at the Zoo, the big black one that they said had once escaped? Well, it has just the same look in its horrid eyes as this man has. How is it that he will never look at you when you are speaking to him, and is always looking at you when you are not?"

"But my dear Milly! as you generally turn your back upon him—"

"That makes no difference. I know he's looking at me. I can sometimes shut my eyes and see his fixed on me; just like the snake's!"

"Milly, you're a goose!"

"I'm not. Jack hates him, too. Jack never comes when he's here."

"And Jack, as you often say, is a bear," said her sister, smiling.

"So he is; but a dear, honest bear! *He* can look one in the face."

What more passed between the sisters on this subject matters not. The upshot was,

that pretty Milly promised she would follow Jack's example, as far as was possible, and avoid Mr. Blisset till her foolish fancy had worn off.

Mary, always considerate and tender towards her younger sister, was more than ever so now, as her woman's tact showed her that she was not happy. "Sad young men," especially sad young Marquises, are very attractive as ball-room acquaintances, on account of their very sadness; but when acquaintance ripens into friendship and friendship into something else, it is bad to remember the original cause of the attraction. Poor Milly could not know or even guess why her Aunt Willerton and other high-placed matrons shook their heads when Lord Winthorpe was named. Sadness, such as his was, of course, an unknown quality to her innocent mind. She only knew that he was petted and courted by everyone, and was very proud to find him inclined to pet and court her. They had met often during her visit to London, and at her aunt's ball his arm had somehow or other got round her waist when the orchestra was *not* playing a waltz or anything else, and in a place where people do not usually dance; and he had begun to whisper that in her ear which, had they not been interrupted, would have made

her very happy to hear. Then came the news of the old Lord Hilton's death, and her consequent seclusion from the gay scenes where they had met. Let us do the sad young Marquis justice, and say that he would have resumed the conversation so abruptly broken short in Mrs. Willerton's conservatory, if he had had the chance; but the house was shut up until after the funeral, and then he was obliged to join that confounded party in Scotland.

Lord Hilton could no more keep a secret than he could a sovereign, of course blurted out what the Marquis had said about buying a yacht and coming to the Isle of Wight—a determination which reconsoled Milly to her black dresses and forced retirement to that “stupid place,” as she was pleased now to call it.

Poor Milly! weeks passed away, and the coming man came not, though the papers devoted to fashionable intelligence had duly chronicled the breaking-up of his shooting party, after the destruction of I know not how many thousands of grouse. The same interesting authorities subsequently informed the world that his Lordship had gone to Baden-Baden, and there were those who reported that his lordship was playing—well, not exactly the instruments of angels—in that attractive

city. Milly only knew that he did not come to the Isle of Wight, and that was quite bad enough for her.

"What on earth is the matter with you two girls?" asked Jack one day, as they sat together on the lawn. "Has little Con gone sentimental and bit Milly, or *vice vicious*? I declare you are both as stupid as three owls."

"Remember that we have been nearly an hour and a half in your company, and excuse us," replied Milly.

"It is lamentable to reflect how young ladies neglect the opportunities of improving themselves, which a beneficent Providence affords them," retorted Jack.

"Are you going then? Good bye," said Milly.

And so the battle went on.

Later on in the day, Jack took Mary Aylwarde aside, and asked her gravely what was the matter with little Con.

"I hope I'm wrong, Jack," she replied, with that steady, kind look in her eyes which made her so loveable, "but I—do you think she's happy in her home?"

"Where's that?"

"I mean, do you think that she and her mother—I hardly know how to express myself properly in such a case—but you understand me, don't you?"

"I think I do."

"There's something preying upon her mind—that is certain; and she is such a dear, good little thing that I cannot think it is her fault. Every hour she can get away, she spends with us; and yet she mopes as you have noticed. What do you think she asked me the other day?"

"What?"

"If I thought she was clever enough to be a governess?"

"Oh Lord! Fancy little Con teaching."

"Depend upon it, Jack, she had some motive for the question. Little Con is anything but a fool. You and papa are quite mistaken in treating her as you do, like a mere winsome plaything. She is cleverer than most girls, I know. She has a fund of sound common sense, and a quickness of observation which would startle you, if you knew her as I do."

"She seems to me to be always in a dream."

"Not a pleasant one, I am afraid; poor girl."

"Can't you wake her up?"

"I think it would be unwise to try. Perhaps she will confide in me some day. The confidence of so timid and nervous a disposition is not to be forced."

You will observe that it had come to be

“Jack” and “Mary,” and “Milly” and “little Con,” with these four in lieu of “Mr. Hill,” the “Ladies Aylwarde,” and “Miss Conway.” How and when this familiarity began, they none of them cared to inquire, and to what it was to lead they none of them guessed. Lord Hilton had, indeed protested at our good-for-nothing being spoken of by his daughter as “Jack”—said it was highly indecorous, and the next day found himself “Jack”-ing his visitor to his face. What was there about the fellow that made those high-bred girls, and that pompous old nobleman forget all the proprieties in this way?

Some time before Jack was “Jack” at the Ventnor Villa, he had been taken into its noble owner’s confidence—as half the place had been—respecting the great reversion muddle. Not that the good-for-nothing was supposed to be of the least assistance in unmuddling it, but simply that his entertainer might relieve himself a little by abusing lawyers in general, and Champion in particular. Jack knew nothing of Champion, and concluding that he must be a very stupid person indeed from the manner in which his client spoke of him, (Jack had not found out the Earl’s weak point yet) thought he would say a good word for an old friend, and suggested an acquaintance, Mr. Bloxam of the

Priory, Southerton, as the very man of men to make all smooth. A few questions served to prove the jolly lawyer's identity with the companion of the Earl's early days, when he was walking the hospitals.

Lord Hilton had not a bad heart. He was merely one of those people to whom "out of sight" is "out of mind."

"We were young fellows together," he said in a lower and sadder voice than was his wont; "and at one time, I thought I owed him the greatest happiness of my life. I was mistaken, Mr. Hill, terribly mistaken; but that does not alter my opinion of your friend—my friend. He was in a very bad way when I saw him last, long ago, long before my eldest child was born. I went abroad and lost sight of him. I wish I had looked him up when I was in London. When you see him again, Mr. Hill, please tell him so; tell him how glad I am that he is well and prosperous. Has he a family?"

"A large one—all girls, and he spoils them awfully," replied Jack. "It seems that he was awfully bullied by his guardian when he was a boy, and so he takes the other tack with his children, and lets them do just as they please."

"He had a hard, bitter man to deal with."

"I wish he had been a little harder with me," replied Jack.

"Why, what have you ever had to do with Jabez Standring?"

"He was my guardian."

This conversation took place as they sat over their wine after dinner. The Earl turned deadly pale as Jack spoke, and the glass of claret which had just touched his lips, almost fell from his hand.

"Are you any relation of—of that man?" he asked after a pause.

"None whatever; he was only my guardian."

"Have you any relations of the name or Duncan?"

"Not that I know of. Why do you ask?"

"No matter," said the Earl in a musing tone. "Strange, that having authority over you, he did not use it as he did with any one else who had the misfortune to be dependent upon him. That man, Mr. Hill, has—but what is the use of talking. Have you seen much of him lately?"

"I don't think I ever saw him but once, and that was when we parted for good. All our business was done through Mr. Blisset."

"Ah! I see now," said the Earl quickly, "that is the reason why you don't like poor Blisset."

"I am not aware, my lord, that I have ever said anything respecting him that should give you the idea I disliked him ; and as a fellow guest in your house—"

"I am not charging you with any want of courtesy, Mr. Hill. On the contrary, it is just because you are strictly courteous to him, whilst so very open and frank with the rest of us—and we all like you for being so—that I think there must be something between you. What have you to say against Blisset ?"

"My lord," replied Jack, turning his chair so that his honest eyes met the Earl's inquiring gaze, "I think and speak, when necessary, of a man as I find him. No doubt your lordship does the same. Mr. Blisset is in a different position now to that in which I have known him, and no doubt he has changed. I can see, from the fact of my being permitted to visit here, that he who is much more useful to you than I could ever be, has not influenced your lordship against me, and he could say a good many things with truth, too, of me, which might shut the doors of that drawing-room in my face. Well, I hope I've changed a little for the better as well. I don't like him ; but that is no reason why your lordship should not."

Earl Hilton cracked a few nuts in silence,

and then he said, "We began this conversation without so many 'my lords' and 'your lordships.' I suppose I put you on your propriety when I talked of courtesy; but I like you best when you're natural, Jack."

This was the breaking of the ice. Jack was Jack thereafter.

When Jack's visits to the Villa began to become more numerous and prolonged, he felt a little guilty for leaving Beckwith to shift for himself, and was glad to find Andrew Standring so often at their lodgings, glad for more than one reason, because his presence gave Beckwith no chance of returning to the subject which Jack disliked. He could not bear to be chaffed about those girls, and his friends' arguments against women were just now very distasteful.

"Of course you're coming out of your shell to-morrow, you old hermit-crab," said Jack to him one day, "and see the Regatta; and look here, Willerton, who knows you by reputation, has asked me again to bring you to luncheon on board his yacht. He'll be offended if you don't come."

"I would not offend Mr. Willerton for a good deal," he replied gravely; "but—"

"But me no buts. Come, old man, to please me."

"If you put it that way, Jack, I cannot

refuse," the sad manly smile lighting up his now healthy face. "Is it a man's party?"

"The Lord forbid! There'll be the Hilton girls and Mrs. Willerton, with a friend who is staying with her, and her daughter—such a nice little girl! and one or two more."

"Must I go, Jack?"

"Driveller, yes! And you are to bring Wasp. Lady Amelia Aylwarde wants to see Wasp. Jack (the starling had been christened after our good-for-nothing) was invited too; but I don't see exactly how we could take him."

"Ha, I see," replied Beckwith, "and I am to go as the menagerie man in charge of the other more attractive animals."

"Don't talk like that, Beck," said Jack, really hurt with the bitter tone in which those words were said. "Do give yourself the chance of finding out that people will like you for yourself. Hang it all! these people like *me*, and you could cut me out all to nothing if you chose."

The Regatta day arrived. The grand yellow chariot brought the Hilton party to the pier, and Beckwith was duly introduced to the Earl and his daughters. Mrs. Willerton was a little late, as usual, and as the "Kelpie's" boat was in attendance, and could only take some four or five passengers at a

time, it was arranged that Jack should convoy the first detachment, consisting of Mary and Milly Aylwarde, Ex-Oracle Lilly and his wife and daughter, leaving the Earl and Beckwith to come on with the Willerton squadron when they arrived.

"It was all my fault, dear Lord Hilton," simpered Mrs. Conway, as she settled a cloud of muslin and lace around her in the stern sheets, twenty minutes after the first party had gained the "Kelpie's" deck. "You must not scold dearest Gertrude. It was I kept her waiting. My maid has really grown *so* careless. My darling Constance are you not sitting on my dress? Do you think it will be very rough, I do so hope not. I'm such a dreadful sailor. Is that the 'Kelpie?'" she continued, pointing out an American timber ship of about 800 tons which had just anchored. "What that one with the red cross flag! How very small she is. Will there be any danger, dear Lord Hilton?"

Lord Hilton expressed his opinion that small as the "Kelpie" undoubtedly was in comparison with the timber ship, one might take luncheon on board her whilst at anchor in Cowes harbour, without serious risk of life; and so the lady was pacified.

What trouble it took to get her and her lace and muslin up the side of the yacht, I

leave to the imagination of those who have had to suffer in like cases. She declared that she should die if obliged to mount that dreadful ladder (full three steps high), and behaved in such a manner as to oblige her dearest Gertrude to tell her "not to be so absurd."

"Well, and where's Beckwith?" asked Jack, looking round when all were on board.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Earl, "we must have forgotten him; that woman made such a fuss," he added, *sotto voce* to Spencer Willerton, "that—

"Let the boat go again to the Pier for a gentleman who is waiting there, Mr. Oxon," said the ready statesman to his sailing master, "and look sharp, please."

The boat went, and the coxswain looked sharp, but he could find no gentleman.

"Hang the fellow!" thought Jack, "he's turned tail at the last moment."

When the day's sport was over, and Jack returned to his lodgings, with his mind full of the severe rating he was determined to give his friend, he found the windows dark, and the room empty. Mr. Beckwith, said the landlady, had packed up his things, and gone by the four o'clock steamer. Had he left no message, no letter? Yes, there was a letter on Mr. Hill's table. It ran as follows:—

"Dear Jack,

"I came here to get well. I am well, and so—to use your own expressive language—I have hooked it back to the slums. I don't care for regattas.

"Your's ever,

"G. BECKWITH."

"It's a pity as he has gone so soon," said the landlady, "and he getting round so nicely. Poor gentleman! He looked dreadful bad when he came in. He must have had another attack."

CHAPTER VIII.

BY POST.

*Martin Bloxam to the Rt. Hon. the Earl of
Hilton.*

“My dear Lord Hilton,

“I duly received your letter, dated the 14th inst., in which you are good enough to request that I should act for you as your legal adviser in the matter therein mentioned. If it had been confined to business, I could have easily answered by return of post, as you desired, but you entered into other points which seemed to me to require time to think over. But first to business. I am much obliged to you, and my friend Hill, but I cannot take up your case; in the first place, because it is quite out of my line; and in the second, because as Champion is my London agent it would not be proper for me to supplant him. If I could have become your lawyer, you would have followed my advice. Follow it now, and leave your business where it is. It is in very good hands.

“The friendly tone in which the more

business part of your letter is written emboldens me to offer a suggestion, which I hope you will take as it is meant. I read, with pain and surprise, the passage in which you refer to your first wife. Remember that I owe to you both a life which has been a very happy one. You certainly had the start of her in helping me in my time of sore need, but she came to my bedside with intentions as good as yours, and at a far greater risk. Let me stand for a moment between poor Julia, and the anger which all these years has not cooled.

“From the day of your marriage until now we have not met; you went your way, and I mine; and until I heard of your affray with old Standring (which by some mismanagement was allowed to get into the papers) I was not aware that there was anything wrong. Are you quite sure that things are as bad as they seem? You say that Jabez Standring admitted the ‘villainy of his son, and his ward’s baseness.’ He was illdisposed towards both, and was always inclined to put the worst construction on everything that was done by those who had offended him. He was very bitter against you. In such a case as this, nothing should be taken as granted; with such a man as Jabez, one should be always on one’s guard; and yet,

you must excuse my saying that you have condemned a true, brave, loving woman upon evidence which I, for one, would not accept, unsupported, against the most miserable out-cast in the streets. Of course, I have concluded that having thought proper to give me your reasons for writing of poor Julia as you do, you have given me the most weighty that exist. If this be not so, I retract what I have said, and beg your pardon.

“Anyway, there is now a means of clearing up a good deal. Andrew Standring is in England. I do not say see him, because the tone of your letter shows me that Lord Hilton and my impetuous friend Bertram Aylwarde are still one and the same. Let *me* see him. Things cannot be worse than you take them to be, and they may be better.

“This is a delicate affair for a third person to meddle with, I know; but after mature consideration I deem it my duty and—as you have been so kind as to ask me to consider that the friendship of your youth is unbroken—my right to say what I have said. If you accept my proposition I shall be very glad, and if you snub me for making it, I tell you frankly that I shall not repent what I have done.

“Thanking you for your good wishes to-

wards myself and family, I remain, my dear Lord Hilton,

“Yours very sincerely,
“MARTIN BLOXAM.”

The Earl of Hilton to Martin Bloxam, Esq.

“The Earl of Hilton presents his compliments to Mr. Bloxam, and begs to acknowledge the receipt of his letter, declining to render his professional services.

“With regard to the other subject contained in Mr. Bloxam’s letter, the Earl of Hilton has to observe that he is not in the habit of acting on insufficient evidence.

“Sea-View Villa, Ventnor, Sept. 19th.”

Miss Bloxam to John Hill, Esq.

“My dear Jack,

“I should not have thought of writing to you, if papa had not said the other day at breakfast, apropos of nothing, that you were a good fellow, but wished to the something or other (you know papa) that you would not go recommending clients to him.

“In an evil hour, at poor Catherine’s request, and you know we cannot refuse *her* anything, I lent my mare to a new curate we have, and the clever thing threw him down and broke her knees. Of course I am seeing to her myself, and I hope to bring her round without much blemish.

“Our Mabel has made a splendid success. She sent a model to Hancock, and it’s going to be cast in silver for the Ascot Plate. We are all so proud.

“Now for bad news. That foolish pretty Maggy Grice has bolted. They sent her to London to an aunt, to get into service or something, and thought it was all right till the aunt wrote and asked why she had not come. Poor old Grice is half heart-broken about it.

“I had a letter yesterday from little Con. She says she met you at the Isle of Wight, ‘quite permiskuous’ as that darling Mrs. Brown would say; Con is about the only correspondent I have, and she writes in anything but a lively strain. What is the matter with her? And please inform anxious friends, who ‘Mary’ is, and why your name should always be coupled with her’s, Mr Jack?

“Now the rest that I have got to say ought to be put into a postscript, because it is the most important news in this letter; but I am not a regular young lady, and so I don’t. Our Beatrice is going to be married to a captain in the —th, a sort of relation of the Wrays. He is not quite the match we thought of for our beauty, but he is a good sort of fellow and (for a plunger) rides well.

He says he had a fag at Eton named Jack Hill, "an awfully cockey little imp," and wants to know if you were he. The description is so perfect, that we all think you were. His name is Dacres, and he used to live at Chertsey. If you were really his 'imp,' I think he intends to ask you to be his best man.

"The wedding-day is not yet fixed, but will be in December; I will let you know in good time. We are going to turn the old house out of windows and have a ball, and I don't know what else. You are to come at least two days before and help. Put yourself into training, for the work will be awful. There's a marquee to decorate, arches of evergreens to make, and all sorts of things to do, which a lot of unprotected females, such as we are, cannot manage. Besides, we shall want a little cheering up when it's all over. So come.

"Your's sincerely,

"ALICE BLOXAM."

Eugène La Place to Abel Blisset, Esq.

"Theatre —, Brussels,

"Dear Sir,

"The young lady whom you did me the pleasure to recommend as *première danseuse*, has been playing what you English call the Satan himself with me. With a salary of

600 francs a week, a carriage and apartment provided for her, a tribute of five bouquets a night guaranteed, what would she more? Alas! there are those who do not know good fortune when she has sat herself at their side.

“The night of one of my grandest representations arrived, an Austrian archduke then assisted. The drama concluded itself with success. The ballet came to commence, when one *distrain* informed me that Mademoiselle Adèle had not yet presented herself. Desolated at such sad news, I rushed myself to her. Figure to yourself my amazement, my horror, when I was informed that she had gone out in a *fiacre* of the place at three hours of the after midday, having packed certain effects in a valise.

“I returned to my theatre like one out of his senses, to find the people furious with me—*me!* the victim of such ingratitude. Despairing, enraged, injured, I presented myself before them. They—the ingrates—would not permit me to speak. I was hissed, *I!* At last the police commanded them the silence, and I was heard.

“The next day Mademoiselle was pleased to return. There had arrived to her a slight indisposition; a voyage to the country was ordered by her medicine. *Mon Dieu!* was such a thing ever heard of without permission.

“My friend, I give you my parole of honour, I did all possible for this girl. I procured the certificate of infirmity, all in rule. I made it appear in the journals. In the cafés, there was not a *maladie* known that I did not give as the cause of her so cursed absence. In vain! The people, brute, *entêté*, instigated by the faction Melanie (big, fat woman, aged, who desired a new engagement) found themselves enraged against her, equally as me. Such a scene, such cries, such violence! and my theatre newly decorated. But I avow Adèle was superb, admirable. The little hands clenched, the eyes full with fire, the bosom heaving of emotion, she confronted the storm, and if you will believe, would have conquered in another moment. But what would you? She is a woman, and woman cannot remain two moments in the same humour. She burst into tears, and all was lost.

“With much of pain I find myself obliged to cancel her engagement, and commence a process against her as a warning to the others. Alas! she was a success, poor child; but what imprudence!

“Always your friend,

“EUGENE LA PLACE.”

Abel Blisset to Mademoiselle Adèle Salzar.

“ Chère Méchante,

“ Ta nouvelle aventure est arrivée jusqu’à moi. Je l’excuse parceque tu es souffrante, et que je sais que quand le corps souffre le jugement en ressent. Va à quelque agréable séjour—à Baden Baden par exemple pour te rétablir. Tu trouveras inclus trois billets de mille francs pour t’acheter un sac de voyage. Si tu es discrète, tu pourras t’en acheter un autre à la fin du mois. Tu me comprends ?

“ A Baden se trouve un certain Milord Anglais, M. le Marquis de Winthorpe. Il est jeune, fort riche, et malgré les conseils de ses amis, il veut faire la folie d’épouser une demoiselle sans naissance.

“ A une moins spirituelle que toi je pourrais suggérer des moyens de détourner, et d’arracher du cœur du jeune amoureux l’image de cette jeune fille ; mais à toi je n’ai qu’à te dire de faire sa connaissance. Tu comprends le reste ?

“ Tout à toi,

“ ABEL BLISSET.”

Mademoiselle Adèle Salzar to Abel Blisset.

“ Cher Ours,

“ Je te comprends à merveille, mais votre jeune ami m’ennuie horriblement. Il insiste pour que nous allions ensemble en Italie. Ne te donnes pas donc la peine de me trouver

un engagement dans ton triste pays. Cela n'est plus nécessaire maintenant. Tu comprends.

“Ta pupile, ADELE.”

John Hill to George Beckwith, Esq.

“Cowes, Sept. 28.

“Dear Beckwith,

“Allow me to congratulate you on your perfect success in having made a fool of me with all my friends here, by shirking Mr. Willerton's invitation at the last moment. If you go on like this your fortune's made, only for my own part I should wish that your talents were turned in some other direction. I can quite understand a man not caring for Regattas; but then he should not promise to go to one. I can understand a fool of a boy disliking ladies' society, because as a fool of a boy, I disliked it myself; but when a man like you turns tail at the sight of a petticoat, I sniff something wrong. We had a very pleasant party, notwithstanding Mr. Beckwith's absence.

“I find that on leaving, you paid the whole of our account. This was something very like an impertinence. I beg to enclose a post-office order for my share. Another time be so good as to leave me to attend to my own business,

“Your's faithfully,

“JOHN HILL.”

George Beckwith to John Hill, Esq.

“Clement’s Inn, Sept. 30,

“My Dear Jack,

“I have lit my pipe with your letter, and have cashed your post-office order. Half twelve pounds seventeen is not six pound five, according to the Cocker of *my* youth. The next time you want to be spiteful, be accurate.

“As you are a young hand on the *Censor*, take my advice and don’t stay away longer than you can help,

“Your’s sincerely,

“G. BECKWITH.”

*Messrs. Champion, Son, and Day, to the
Right Hon. the Earl of Hilton.*

“Thurloe Chambers, Sept. 30.

“My Lord,

“In compliance with your lordship’s instructions, we have placed ourselves in communication with Mr. Burridger, with a view of obtaining his assistance with regard to the proofs required by the counsel for the parties with whom we have been in treaty for a loan of twenty-five thousand pounds to be secured on your reversionary interest in the Chapel Hilton estate.

“It was of course necessary to inform Mr. Burridger that the more immediate reversioner was dead, in order that he might apply

himself to the investigation, whether or not the said reversioner had left male issue line surviving. To our surprise, Mr. Burridger entirely forgot himself—made use of most unbecoming language, especially against Mr. Blisset; and re-asserting that Mr. Placemore was now alive and a prisoner at Bermuda; went so far as to charge those who maintain the contrary with conspiracy and fraud. It was impossible to prolong the conversation whilst Mr. Burridger was in such a mood, and he left our office stating that he should communicate directly with your Lordship. In his excitement, however, he let fall an expression of which we have taken note, and if our inquiries—which have already commenced—are as successful as we hope they may be, there will be no necessity for troubling Mr. Burridger again on this subject. At any rate, we would respectfully suggest that your Lordship should not see or write to the said person, until you have heard from us again.

“ We are, my Lord,

“ Your Lordship’s most obedient servants,

“ CHAMPION, SON AND DAY.”

Mr. Robert Burridger to the Earl of Hilton.

“ My Lord Earl Hilton,

“ I have just come back from your lawyer, who has used me shameful, as might be ex-

pected of him who failed to find out what I did, and it was his duty to do, and is spiteful accordingly. Mr. Blisset may say what he likes, but he had better take care. Why did he sell me what he called a clue to find out Mr. Placemore for twenty pounds, and let me get a reward of £220, if he knew all the time that he was dead? Do you suppose a judge and jury would believe him on his oath after that? *I know why you want to make out that he is dead!* and you will find me a better friend than a score of Abel Blissets, much as he thinks of himself; and I tell him, or anyone else, that they had best not make an enemy of me, who have worked hard for my living, and mean well, which is more than he can say of himself, if he speaks the truth, which he seldom does, if there is anything to be got by what is not.

“If your Lordship, the Earl of Hilton, would ask me down again to your villa, I would tell you things about this Blisset, in confidence and without prejudice; but I cannot and will not be put upon through Champions and Blissets, and it is well to know one’s real friends from those that is sham.

“Your obedient servant,

“R. BURRIDGE.”

“P.S. I have signed articles with Mr. Samuel Isaacs, a gentleman of high respect-

ability and talent, No. 31 (a), Buckingham Street, Strand, who would do all your business well and cheap, and not insult them as wishes you well, like those Champions, which isn't a first rate firm, for all their pretence.

“ R. B.”

Lord Hilton to Henry St. John Champion, Esq.

“ My dear Champion,

“ Knowing as you do how I detest mystery and suspense, I am surprised that you could have written to me as you did on the 30th. I have received a letter from that person Burridger, full of the vilest insinuations; but *I* remember that such creatures as these are useful, and am not going to lose my temper with him, as it seems you did. I enclose you his letter, which you will please return. What hint did he let fall? What inquiries are you making? Is there ever to be an end to this weary work? If it were not for that fine fellow, Blisset, who has advanced me two thousand pounds without as much as a scrape of a pen to answer for it, I should be at my wits' ends. Do try for a moment not to be the lawyer, and write fully.

“ Faithfully yours, HILTON.”

*Henry St. John Champion to the Right Hon.
the Earl of Hilton.*

“ My dear Lord Hilton,

“ I am afraid our letter of the 30th was

somewhat too formal under all the circumstances ; but I was bound to write you something, and could not say all I had in my mind, for fear of disappointing you. I did not lose my temper with Mr. Burridger, as you seem to think, but contrived that he should lose his with me. At first, I admit that I was taken aback when he became so angry ; but a moment's reflection showed me that there must be some deeper cause for his vexation than what he was pleased to call your want of confidence in him. I admit, too, that I goaded him pretty sharply, and the result was that he threw down his cards and showed me his hand. His scheme was to seek Placemore, and get, perhaps, as many thousands out of him as he had hundreds out of you, and the news that the man was dead, was, of course, a heavy blow. But what he felt most of all was that Mr. Blisset—whom he hates and affects to despise—should have got the better of him. Working on his hatred for B., I got him to state every reason he had for thinking that Placemore was still alive, and then out came the fact—studiously concealed in his report—that his wife is living, and that the little rascal had got all his information from her. He had never been to Jersey, or Antwerp, or Glasgow, or any of the other places he pretended to have made

inquiries in. His story of having accidentally obtained a clue to the identity of Placemore with Yates from the Rev. Henry Owen, is sheer fudge. He did see that gentleman, but purposely, and from information given by Placemore's wife. His *cheval de bataille* is, that she knows him to be alive—that is, he (Burridger) says she does. I could not make him angry enough to blurt out her address, but I shall have it to-night, and shall see her without delay.

“It is clear enough for all our purposes that the man is dead, and she is the best possible evidence as to the other point. I think—mind I *think* only—that you need be under no apprehension as to the result, because if there be a son, Mr. Burridger would not have insisted, as he did against all evidence to the contrary, that the father was alive. A woman and a child (who must be under age if he exist at all), would be easier dupes for him than a man of Placemore's stamp. Expect a telegram to-night or early to-morrow from

“Yours faithfully,

“H. ST. JOHN CHAMPION.”

The Earl of Hilton to Abel Blisset, Esq.

“My dear Mr. Blisset,

“Congratulate me. All my troubles are over; Champion, who has behaved with ad-

mirable tact and energy, has discovered that Placemore's wife is living, and he has seen her. She says that he has never had a son, and as the poor woman has been leading a most respectable life for many years as matron of an infant school near Hendon, her evidence is conclusive. It is curious, however, that she insists that her husband is alive, though she has not seen or heard of him since he left Millbank for the penal settlement. She says she should have received some warning if he had died; but this is all nonsense.

"When you have a day or two to spare, will you run down with me to Hilton, and consult with me as to restorations, &c., &c. Is not Crace as good a man as I can employ for general upholstery work and decorations? I have engaged a first-rate man, pupil of Paxton, to lay out the pleasure grounds. I am afraid I cannot offer you any shooting this year; for, although as a matter of strict right, I believe that the late Earl's engagements in this respect died with him; as a matter of *policy*, it will be well to leave my neighbour, Sir Richard Plumer, in possession of them for the present.

"I shall come up to town about the beginning of December, as I have many things to attend to; so if you hear of an eligible house

to let, pray take it for me. I have a weakness for Park Lane, the Piccadilly end of course.

"Believe me, my dear Blisset, that your prompt and timely assistance will never be forgotten. With your brilliant prospects I cannot ask you to re-assume the duties you so kindly discharged for me during my late illness, but any service that I can render, you have only to ask.

"I think of making the young man Hill my private secretary. He seems clever. What do you think ?

"Your's most sincerely,

"HILTON.

"Sea-View Villa, Oct. 4th."

The Earl of Hilton to Mr. R. Burridger.

"Sir,

"I have received your impertinent letter, and my reply is that you may consider yourself extremely fortunate that more important engagements prevent me from having you prosecuted for obtaining money under false pretences.

"Your obedient servant,

"HILTON.

"Sea-View Villa, Oct. 4th."

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. CONWAY LOSES HER BRACELET.

SPENCER WILLERTON started for a cruise to Cherbourg, on the evening of the Regatta which George Beckwith did not care for, and the next morning there was tumult in the dwelling of his wife. Her dearest Matilda had lost a bracelet—a plain gold band with a pearl snap which she valued, oh, so much ! for had it not been a present from her dearest Gertrude ? She had taken it off when they came home, and placed it with other trinkets on the dressing-table. There was no one there but Blair (her maid) and Constance, and Constance had seen her take it off and place it in its case, for she was always so particular about it. Of all her little treasures she valued it the most, and oh, it was heart-rending to lose it ? She would give everything else she possessed to get it back. Oh, would not dearest Gertrude try and get it back for her ?

Dearest Gertrude was of course very much annoyed that such a thing should happen in her house, and as one always takes the part

of one's own servants, her suspicions fell on the delinquent Blair.

Mrs. Willerton, accustomed from her girlhood to domestics of the utmost (external) propriety, could not understand her dearest Matilda retaining the services of a young person who was capable, on occasion, of thumping her mistress's head against the bed-post, and deemed that there was no crime too grave for such a termagant to commit. Still if her dearest Matilda was satisfied, &c., &c. She would not prevent anyone to interfere between herself and *her* maid, and so &c. &c. Was dearest Matilda quite sure that the girl was honest? Dearest Matilda clasped her white hands in agony, and declared that it was too shocking to think otherwise; only Constance had *seen* her place the bracelet in its case, and no one else had entered the room till the morning when it was missed; because, as dearest Gertrude well knew, those dreadful cannons and the rolling of the ship had given her (dearest Matilda) such a headache that she could not come down to dinner.

The suspected Blair was summoned and told sternly by Mrs. Willerton (for her own mistress *could not* be harsh with the unfortunate girl) that the bracelet must be found, and she (the unfortunate) made matters worse than they already were, by sulkily refusing

to search for it any more, saying that she knew her mistress was looking out for something against her, and this was it.

It is a boast of us Britons that we are innate lovers of justice for justice sake; but one thing is quite clear, we like it best at a distance; else, why do so many of us think it a degradation to give evidence in a court of law, and shrink from doing our duty to society by prosecuting evil doers?

In half an hour the affair was known all over the house, and one after the other the servants presented themselves before the perplexed mistress, requesting to know if they might speak. Permission granted, they commenced by asserting their innocence, and ended, illogically after their kind, by insisting upon having their boxes searched.

"I think, my dear," said Mrs. Willerton, "that I had better send for my brother. It is always best to have a man to deal with these things, and really Fred is no use."

That young gentleman had declared that it was all "jolly rot," and he wouldn't be bothered about it. Besides he was going to see a friend at Portsmouth.

So Lord Hilton was sent for, and arrived clothed in magisterial dignity. The sad tale was told, and "Oh," concluded Mrs. Conway, "if she would only confess, and give it

back, I would forgive her—indeed I would.”

But the accused was sulkily silent, as before. She had searched high and low, and could not find the bracelet. She was not going to search for it any more. They might do what they liked—she knew nothing of the bracelet—her mistress had a grudge against her—was all she would say.

“What you say against your mistress, young woman,” said Lord Hilton, as though from the bench, “does not prepossess us in your favour. But your mistress does not stand alone, Miss Constance saw her mamma take off the bracelet when you were present.”

“Does Miss Constance say I stole it?” was the reply.

“What does Constance say?” asked the peer, in a whisper.

“Well, really, we don’t exactly know,” replied his sister. “She left early for your house. Why did you not bring her?”

“How on earth was I to know what was the matter? Did Constance leave before you missed your bracelet, Mrs. Conway?”

“I think—I suppose so; but, oh, Lord Hilton, you cannot think that the dear child—”

“—God forbid, madam—God forbid!” the Earl exclaimed. “Only, how was it that she spoke to you about the bracelet when you had not missed it?”

"She was there when I took it off and put it in its case," persisted Mrs. Conway.

"And she told you she saw you do so?"

"Of course she did."

"Well, if you are sure that no one else entered the room, I think you are bound to give the young woman into custody; I do, indeed," said the peer.

"For the other servants' sake you must, really, Matilda," added Mrs. Willerton; "there is not one who would stay with me if it were not cleared up. And really I am so well suited that—"

"— Oh, but it will be so dreadful!" pleaded "dearest Matilda."

"It is your duty to society," said the Earl.

"If I give her five pounds will she restore it and beg pardon?" asked Mrs. Conway, half crying.

"No, ma'am," replied the subject of the above colloquy, doggedly, "not if you were to give me five hundred pounds; and, as for begging your pardon, we'll see who has to beg pardon by and by. I never saw the bracelet, and I never took it, and this is a plot against me because—"

"Hush, hush! you only make matters worse by speaking like that," interrupted Lord Hilton. "You are an ungrateful girl. How many mistresses are there, do you

think, who would be as considerate and forgiving as your's has been? Give her into custody, Mrs. Conway."

And given into custody she was; her mistress imploring the policeman, to his infinite amusement, that she might not be chained, or whipped, or anything dreadful.

Towards the evening Constance returned, and was told that her mother wished to see her immediately. She went up to her room and was greeted with more than usual affection, for, as before observed, something like a cloud had begun to pass and thicken between this parent and child.

"You remember, my darling, the pretty bracelet that dear Mrs. Willerton gave me," said she, taking Constance's hand and caressing it.

"Yes, mamma."

"And you know I wore it yesterday, at the regatta?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Well, that wicked girl Blair has stolen it."

"Blair stolen it! Oh, I don't think she could, mamma."

"There was no one else who had an opportunity. You saw me take it off when I came back so ill. Are you listening, dear? I say you saw me take it off when I came home, and put it in its case on the dressing-table."

"Ah, that I cannot say, I did not notice," replied Constance.

"But you *must* have noticed. Why you helped to undress me, and admit I wore it."

"Of course you did take it off, mamma; but I did not see you do so."

"I took it off and put it in its case on that table, and you were standing by, Constance. How can you say you did not see me?" demanded her mother getting a little flushed.

"Because I did not, mamma."

"Look here, dearest, I did really put it there, and if you will only think a little you will remember, and I have told them you saw me, and—and—"

"Well, mamma!"

"So of course, if you are asked, you say you saw me take it off, I did Constance—I did indeed! Do you think I would tell a falsehood about such a thing?"

"You wish me to tell one."

"It's not a falsehood, Constance; how dare you! I put it into that very box as I always do." Mrs. Conway reiterated.

"I do not say you did not, mamma. I only say that I did not see you do so," Constance replied.

"You wicked child to turn against your own mother," cried Mrs. Conway, turning very pale. Constance started and half raised her

hand, as though to ward off an expected blow.

"I do not turn against you, mamma," she said faintly.

"Then why will you not tell the truth?"

"If I am asked, mamma, and I hope I shall not be, I will say exactly what I saw and what I know. Oh, mamma! do not press me to tell untruths, I cannot, I will not. Things which I have said when I was a child have been coming back to me, and I feel sure now that I did not see what I said I had seen. You told me I had seen them, and—and I thought—oh, mamma, you know what I mean."

A flood of crimson rushed over the mother's face, and washed away all trace of the placid refined lady we have known. A furious virago took her place, and seizing poor Constance by the shoulder, shook her till she fell.

"Say another word like that, you little devil, and I kill you," muttered the other Mrs. Conway, between her clenched teeth.

"Better kill me than let me lead this life of deceit," wept poor Constance.

"Nasty little liar! But they shall know what you are."

"Mamma!" exclaimed the taunted girl springing to her feet, a little—thank God, a very little, of her mother's expression lighting up her pale face—"Don't drive me too

far. Remember I have your blood in my veins. Call me what you like here, beat me, if you like, as you have often beaten me before; but take care. You cannot expect me to love or respect you; but vilefy me to those who I love and respect, and who I do hope love me, and—oh, don't, mamma, don't, don't, don't!"

And poor little Con broke down, and burst into a flood of tears.

"Cease that sobbing, you stupid child!" said her mother, coming a degree or two back towards the unreal Mrs. Conway. "I did not mean what I said; and if you will only tell Lord Hilton that you saw me put up the bracelet—which I swear I did—I—"

"No, mamma, I will not!" replied Constance, firmly, dashing aside her tears. "I will say nothing, or I will tell the truth. And, mamma, you often say I am an expense and an encumbrance to you. For God's sake, send me back to school! I am sure they would take me as a pupil-teacher, and in a year or two I could go as a governess, and be independent."

"Independent as a governess!"

"Independent of you! I will work—I care not how hard, but I cannot lead this life. It is killing me. You told me just now I was a liar, and so I have been, but

for your sake. When you thrust the candle in my face at Brighton, I was obliged to say I burnt myself reading in bed. When you wrenched my hand at Southerton I told a falsehood, and said I had sprained it. When you beat Blair the other day, and accused her of attacking you, I *acted* a lie by seeming to consent to what you told them all. *I will not* do so again. Let me go and teach, or—oh, mamma! let me go to my father.”

The devil had begun to rise again in Mrs. Conway as Constance spoke, but her last words struck her down as with a heavy blow.

“You—you don’t know what you are saying!” she muttered, turning deadly pale.

“I do, mamma. I have thought much about him lately. I will do you no harm, pray understand that.”

“You cannot. All the world knows that your father is a—”

“Oh, hush, mamma! he is my father!”

This painful conversation was fortunately broken off by the entrance of Mrs. Willerton’s maid, who came with her lady’s compliments to know if she could be of any service in the absence of the culprit.

We saw long ago how little Con had been affected by Jack Hill’s theory about the innate truthfulness of children; how a mist had come over her mind’s eye as she looked

back into the past, and how love for her long absent father had begun to grow in her heart. We know also that it was mainly upon her testimony that society had condemned George Conway, and now we know how her testimony was prepared. Had the bracelet affair happened ten years before, her mother would have taken her into her lap, told her she was a dear sweet child, and added that she must have seen that trinket replaced in its box until her childish, trusting mind was moulded to the stronger will. Then when others had to be convinced, the words would have been put into her mouth thus : " You did see me, didn't you, my pet ?" and " Yes, mamma dear," would have followed as a matter of course.

In like manner, such questions as " Did not your wicked papa come home tipsy and break poor mamma's beautiful watch ?" and " Didn't papa give me this dreadful bruise on my arm ?" and " Didn't papa say he was going fishing in Wales, and all the time was in London with a creature ?" were actually put and answered by the poor child as she had been taught to answer them.

Are you going to condemn my poor little Con, and say that she ought not to have given way to such influences ? Before you do so, please to pause, and consider the

reverse of this painful picture. Think how many children, whose fathers really are drunkards and brutes, and unfaithful, have been brought up to believe them the best of men. How often have such loving lies as "dear papa was only being funny," "papa did not mean to hurt me, darling, I am not hurt," have won credence, though the child has seen the drink in its father's hand, and the blood upon its mother's face. Belief came easier to Constance Conway than to those others.

There was the broken watch to show—it had fallen from her side. There was the bruised arm, black and blue—well, he had held her to prevent disgraceful violence whilst in one of her paroxysms of anger, and so on. With her mother's reiterated lessons in her ear, and the half truth before her eyes, was it a wonder that the child acted the part so well rehearsed? There were a few sensible people who thought it strange that a child of seven years old should know that its father was in London "with a creature," and took the statement so vouched at its worth; but society is only a big child, and will believe what it is told (especially if it be something wicked) without inquiring into its truth, much as unhappy Constance did, though without her excuse.

Are you going to say that no mother could

be so bad as to teach a child to lie against its father? It is unnecessary to discuss the question in the abstract. The devils, passion and jealousy, poisoned Mrs. Conway's ear (just as she afterwards poisoned that of her child) until she believed what she said. She was as certain of her husband's brutality and faithlessness as she was of sulky Blair's dishonesty. The proofs were so conclusive, at least so they seemed to her and her friends. The time came when George Conway could not deny one part of the accusation. Imagine, if you please, a man of sensitive and affectionate disposition, accused in the presence of servants and strangers of every crime in the decalogue, with his child sitting by and answering "yes, mamma," to each clause in the indictment; realise such a position if you can, before you pick up your stone.

It was the recurrence of such affairs as that of the bracelet, in which she was required to say more or less than she was really sure of, which raised the mist in which poor little Con's mind wandered. Two years passed, at school whilst her mother was travelling on the Continent, weakened the influence that had made her the mere echo of that lady's words; and this, combined with the influence of out-spoken Alice Bloxam, and high-minded Mary Aylwarde, let in the

light. The mist began to clear, and it was not only on the occasions we have noticed, that she might have been found sobbing in the dark, with that original cry of "my father, my father! oh, my father!" choking her. Glibly enough had she endorsed with her "yes, dear mamma," insinuations the meaning of which she could not even now understand, and when told that "wicked man" was wandering over the world amusing himself, and denying his wife and child every comfort due to their station, she began to ask herself what there was to be bought with money that her mother, at least, had to go without. She could remember when they had a fixed home, not such a grand house as the Willerton's, but still a house and an elegant one. Her mother had given that up on the plea that it was so much nicer to be independent, and go about as one pleased, and her grievance at being made a "poor, homeless outcast" put forward afterwards, did not seem well-founded. Again, her mother was never tired of informing people that they could not conceive the sacrifices she made to educate that dear child (meaning Constance); and Constance knew that with the exception of the two years' cheap schooling before mentioned, she had been left pretty much to educate herself; and she

felt keenly the deficiencies under which she laboured. With the shame of her parent's daily life before her, and the effects of her violence constantly torturing her fragile form, is it a matter of wonder or reproach that the natural love and respect of the child should have become undermined, and that some stray spark should send them flying into space?

Such a spark fell at Mrs. Willerton's ball, when she overheard the Admiral tell Fred Willerton and his "jolly fellows," that it was upon her evidence that the world had thrust her father forth, a disgraced man.

After all a mother is a mother, and it was a sore trial to poor little Con. Had her father been dead, or she had been spared the knowledge of the part attributed to her in his condemnation, I think she would have borne her lot, hard as it was, to the end, but now—the more fixed became the idea that she had wronged her father, the more intensely she loved him. Oh! if she could only be the means of making him happy; of making them all happy together again!

Poor little Con!

Some little uneasiness was felt in the Willerton household at the prolonged absence of Mr. Fred, but there were other things to be thought of. The day for holding the petty sessions of the peace for the division in which

Cowes is situated, approached, and Mrs. Conway, to her great dismay, was told to prepare herself to go and give evidence against the stealer of her prized bracelet.

"Oh, dear, is it not over yet?" she asked. "I thought the policeman had taken her away to be transported, or something."

"She has not been tried yet," replied Hilton

"What is the use of trying her when everyone knows she is guilty, said Mrs. Conway, with her pretty petulance. "One would think you didn't believe me, and, although Constance wants to make out that she was mistaken. I do assure you—"

"Please say no more, Mrs. Conway," interrupted the Earl, "I may be obliged to act in the case. I shall try not to do so, but perhaps they will not have a second magistrate without me."

The much-dreaded morning came, and Mrs. Conway, dressed in black silk, with two thick veils on to hide her features from the "dreadful people" of the Court, was just stepping into the carriage to proceed to that disgraceful place, when her dearest Gertrude, usually so placid and reserved, rushed down stairs in a state of the greatest excitement, with a letter which she had just received from her husband, dated Cherbourg, open in her hand.

"Oh, Matilda!" she exclaimed, "what have you done? Read that."

That was the concluding paragraph of Spencer Willerton's letter, and read as follows:

"By the by, some one left a bracelet on the washing-stand in my cabin—a gold band, with pearls on the snap. Is it yours? If not, please find out the owner."

The case of Anne Blair was called on in its turn, and it is needless to say that there was no prosecution. Have I not dared to say that women, as a rule, have no ideas of justice. Well, it was agreed between Mrs. Conway and her hostess that the best thing they could do would be to keep Spencer Willerton's disclosure a secret, and let it be supposed that the former lady's courage had failed her, or her goodness of heart had forbidden her to prosecute. No thought of how the accused girl's character might suffer was permitted to disturb the arrangement.

"You really should be more careful, Matilda," was all Mrs. Willerton had to say; "think how shocking it would have been for me if you had actually sworn to it in Court."

"I always put it up in its case myself," sobbed the other, "I did so love it, and I thought I really did—"

"Well, it is no use talking any more about it; I dare say the girl will get another place, and you need not say a word on the subject in her character. Go and bathe your face, and let the subject drop."

But the subject would not drop ; for at the end of the week came an epistle from Mr. Samuel Moss, attorney-at-law, respectfully inquiring where a writ of slander and false imprisonment at the suit of Anne Blair could be served on her (Mrs. Conway's) husband.

Things having gone so far, there was nothing for it but to make all known to Spencer Willerton, whom you may imagine was not best pleased at what had been going on in his absence.

"She should have begged her pardon in open court," said he to his wife, "and brought her back in the carriage. I have often told you, Gertrude, that I dislike and distrust this woman, and it is to me a matter of wonder how you can make her your friend."

"It was the girl's fault, Spencer," pleaded his wife, "she was so obstinate. She would not say anything."

"What was she to say? How could she know that her mistress had left her bracelet on board my yacht?"

After all they did not tell him of the attempt to drag Constance into a falsehood, but she was present when the letter was shown, and this further proof of her mother's want of truth was the drop which caused the cup of her endurance to overflow.

CHAPTER X.

BLACK MONDAY.

HE was a foolish cock that rooster in the fable who, having found a jewel in his dung-hill, sold it for a husk of corn; but somehow I fancy that the breed is not extinct, and that we have a good many similar cocks (here's two, for that matter) in the national farm-yard. Stupider bipeds even than the hero of the fable, for they don't even find the treasures which lay under their noses. The law of compensation which holds our world together, provides a remedy in the person of a bird, which is eternally scratching about, sometimes finding emeralds, but more often pieces of broken bottles; always crowing loudly over the discovery, and compelling lesser geniuses to accept the object at the finder's value. A cock of this sort goes to breakfast with a general whom the farm-yard has not yet recognised as a second Wellington, comes out with his crop full, crows, and straight the future of his entertainer is made, and his fame established! Out of some twenty thousand labourers on

the farm, who are all poor, rheumatic, and lodged like pigs, our discriminating chanticleer picks out one, not poorer, more rheumatic, or worse lodged than the other nineteen thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine crows, and then every other cock sounds his clarion. In pour subscriptions, and the lucky man is provided for (and spoilt for life).

Take another instance. Whole generations of rats have been picking and stealing in the granary for years and years, and one fine morning our cock, having nothing else to do, catches a wretched rodent *in flagrante delicto*. There never was, and never will be again, so vile a malefactor, and the whole yard rings with his crimes. He is condemned as soon as tried, executed, and then his friends nibble on, undisturbed as before.

Why, this cock is always finding jewels for us! It was he, my dear sir, who told you that young Blank, whom you had considered as really a very stupid person, was really a very superior young man, sought by everybody; and you immediately invited him to dinner. You would never have thought anything of that dress which becomes you so well, my dear madam, if this cock had not crowed about its fac-simile being worn by the Princess de la Tour de Chignon at the Cham of Tartary's ball. Stormer, Q.C., would now be waiting

for briefs in the back seats of Westminster Hall, and Dabstick, R.A., be painting portraits of his landlady's for a fortnight's rent, if it had not been for the cock. You and I would never have found them out. What a debt we owe him ! Sometimes—and this is the most delightful of his discoveries—he discovers *us*. We have been thinking all along that we are only a piece of broken bottle, and he assures us that we are an emerald of the first water. Would Podgers ever have become M.P. for Shuffelborough if it had not been for the cock ? Would our merry friend Dancepartout have raised his eyes to the rich and lovely Miss Plum, if the cock had not crowed “ Hang it all ! a fellow with your looks and manner can go in for anything ? ” We all know the contrary. Then long life to the cock, and long live he.

Jack Hill was the cock of the Fable, and sadly wanted the aid of the other whose praises I have been singing, and at last he found it, only, as Paddy would say, it was a hen.

A fortnight passed in the society of Mary Aylwarde taught him two things—the one, that it would be very satisfactory indeed to be able to win the esteem of such as she was ; and the other, that he might be able to do it if he tried. It never occurred to him to investigate the process by which such

ideas had been created. If it had, he could not have recalled one word of hers which would lead up to such conclusions. And yet, there they were, fixed more deeply than any others had ever been planted, in his mind. There are some women whose presence is surrounded with some strong, subtle, but withal impalpable chemistry which takes all the dross out of a man (who is not all dross), and leaves the pure metal shining. Such was Mary Aylwarde. Did I not say that it was a lucky thing for Jack that he went to Mrs. Willerton's ball?

Another lesson was taught our good-for-nothing by Mary, when she said during their conversation about Constance—

“Little Con is anything but a fool. You and papa were greatly mistaken in treating her as you do, like a mere winsome plaything. She is cleverer than most girls I know. She has a fund of sound, common sense, and a quickness of observation that would startle you if you knew her as I do.”

Such words spoken in Mary's low, sweet voice, and earnest manner, had their effect on Jack. He had seen for some time that little Con was not happy, and he had tried in his rough way to cheer her up. Now he saw how clumsy he had been, and the pained, half-indignant look with which she had re-

ceived some of his sallies, came back and pained him. Every one treated her like a child, except Mary, and he had not the wit to see that she did not, till she told him so in so many words. He wanted the help of the cock, you see.

Little Con was not a child, and (worse luck for him) never had been. A thoughtful, timid girl, left almost entirely to herself for amusement and education will, if it occurs to her to educate herself at all, make an amusement of it, and work very hard at what takes her fancy. In most young lady accomplishments she was woefully deficient. She did not know the use of the globes, and had once spoken disparagingly of that most important study. She was not going to be the captain of a ship, she said. She did not see the good of learning about latitude and longitude. She did not know her dates, which was very sad, and was exceedingly awkward with her needle. She could not even have made you a pen-wiper. On the other hand, she could cut out a model of a steam engine, in scale, with a pen-knife; could give you the cream of Mr. Motley's History of the Dutch Republic, on a sheet of foolscap; was a better botanist than Lord Hilton's famous new gardener; and knew the movements of every star in the heavens.

When Jack first began to treat her as a rational being, he was deeply repaid by the bright, grateful smile which lit up her poor, pale face; and as he went on, it struck him that he had better mind what he was talking about. Quiet and submissive, almost to a fault, she could come out strong when one of her hobbies or heroes was assailed; and on one occasion, tore down one of Master Jack's slashing articles about his ears in a manner which made them tingle. He had dared to sneer at Mr. Pitt. Little Con could not give you the date of Edward the Confessor's baptism, but she had Mr. Pitt, and what he said and did, by heart—and Jack had not, for all his slashing article.

It was a black, a very black Monday for the good-for-nothing when he went to Sea-View to wish good-bye. Beyond one visit of ceremony, he had not troubled Mrs. Willerton with his company, and had seen nothing of Mrs. Conway or her daughter at their temporary home. He did not care to meet Master Fred, and perceived that he was not welcome in his mother's house; beside, did he not see all those he cared to see at Ventnor? No special arrangement was made that Constance should be there to wish him good-bye, but there she was. She was there so often.

Black Monday had not come as it ought.

"I'll just show that fellow Beckwith, that I'm not going to stand his dictation," Jack mused one night, "I meant to go back this week, but I'll be hanged if I go till next."

It was, perhaps, to assist himself against the dictation of Clement's Inn, that he delayed his adieux at Sea-View so long as to miss the boat by which he had arranged to depart, and so was fixed by an astute landlady for another week's rent. Perhaps, it was that the words "good bye little Con," were very hard to say.

When his honest eyes were saying, plainly enough for *her* to read, "my darling, whom I have just learned to love so well, we may never meet again," and his great brown paw trembled so as it closed on her hand; could she not have said "I shall see you soon at Southerton, you know we shall meet at Trix's wedding." Why, when he was gone and she had returned to her home, did she take a miserable bit of a broken dinner plate out of her desk (have you forgotten the day when they caught the big pike) and cry over it, and kiss it again and again? Why did her aching heart ask her so often that night. "Would it be wrong to tell him—would he find me my father—would he hate me if he knew all?"

A pair of geese! If our cock were only there to crow, "Cheer up Jack, the girl loves you," and "Cheer up little Con, tell him all, and you will be happy." But then you see he wasn't.

Jack varied the monotony of his railway journey to London, by rehearsing the inevitable meeting with Beckwith, the dictator. He arranged it all to his own perfect satisfaction. He would take no notice of the delinquent for a day or two, after which the delinquent would of course become penitent and seek him. He would receive him with studied politeness. The delinquent would say this: to which he would reply that, and soon: getting by far the best of the argument, and saying several very clever things. It was all to end happily, however, somehow; but of course to the confusion of the delinquent, and the great glory of Jack. We often settle these sort of things before hand, and if our adversary will only thrust in tierce as is arranged for him, we are ready with our parade and repost in due course; only sometimes he does not, and then our plans are somewhat unsettled.

Jack, who was, as we know, a day after his time, was pleased to see a light in his windows; as tired, cold and hungry he entered the Inn about half past ten at

night after a long and tiresome journey.

"What a good old girl it is," he said to himself, giving the credit to Mrs. Jowers, "I'll be bound she's got some supper ready," and the idea crossed his mind that, after all, he would ask Beckwith to come down and share it with him.

What was his surprise on opening his door to find no Polly Secundus there at all, but the delinquent Beckwith himself, and Andrew Standring ensconced in front of a blazing fire discussing a huge collection of oysters, most temptingly displayed on the table, and flanked by two foaming tankards of "Cooper," and many slices of most artistically cut brown bread and butter.

"We had given you up," said the delinquent slightly moving his chair—Jack's own favourite easy chair—"but better late than never. Make yourself at home."

Now Beckwith had no business to commence in this manner. According to the arrangements which Jack had made for him in the train, he was to have approached his injured friend in a sullen, but somewhat penitential manner, so as to give a cue for the lofty sarcasms which Jack had prepared. But there he was, invading Jack's room, burning Jack's coals, seated in Jack's own chair, and telling him—the injured one—to

make himself at home, as though nothing had gone amiss. It was too bad of Beckwith! He was no better than the housemaid of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme who would not thrust according to rule.

For a moment Jack felt angry, and words came up, which he was very glad afterwards did not come out. The delinquent was taking awful liberties, but looked so pleasant, and innocent withal, that—besides the oysters! I don't pretend for a moment that a man, worth calling a man, can be bribed out of real resentment by anything so trivial, but when the resentment is all book and twaddle, 'tis another thing. Jack could not well quarrel before Andrew Standring. He was bound to be civil to *him*. His passage at arms with Beckwith would keep for the morrow—but the oysters! There was something too in the crackle and blaze of the fire, and the look of home which softened the good-for-nothing. Even the reflection from without had done so a little. Jack sat down and made himself at home as he was bid, and plied with bivalves and their concomitants by Beckwith, found his bad humour oozing away, like Bob Acre's valour, out of his finger's ends.

"By the way, Jack," said Beckwith, when the plate of shells had assumed alarming pro-

portions, and no head was visible on the tankards, "look up there."

Jack looked up, and saw on his once snow white ceiling, what might have been a chart of the Pacific Ocean, with all the islands and coral reefs marked in deep brown.

"My water pipe burst the other night, and would have drowned you if you had been here," continued Beckwith. "They have torn up my flooring to find the place, so that my den is not habitable. That's why we have invaded you."

Andrew Standring got as far as—"I trust that Mr. Hill—" when Jack, who was all Jack again, stopped him with—

"My dear sir, Beckwith knows that he is always welcome here, and that his friends are my friends. Is there anyone to send out for some more 'Cooper?'"

The boy who just arrived for the pots, answered this question. The empty tankards were taken away, and brought back—not empty. Andrew Standring's apparently inexhaustible cheroot-case was handed round, and all restraint vanished.

"Our friend is looking more like himself again, Mr. Hill," observed Standring. "It was he who recognised me at Cowes. I should never have known him. The sea air has done him service, indeed."

"It would have done him more service," replied Jack bluntly, "if he had taken advantage of opportunities to amuse himself, and all that, which offered. Was he always such a humbugging old hermit as he is now? Would you believe it," he continued, without waiting for an answer, or noticing the look which passed between Standring and the object of his remarks, "he was invited to a jolly pic-nic to see the Regatta, and turned tail at the last moment because there were to be women on board!"

A cloud passed over Beckwith's face as Jack spoke. "I did hope," he said, after a pause, "that we should not find it necessary to return to this subject. Fortunately, however, you revive it before a man who knows more about me than perhaps you ever will know, much as I like you, and much as I owe to your kindness of heart. Will you take his word for it, Jack, that I could not have done otherwise than I did, and let there be an end to this weary business?"

"I give you my word, Mr. Hill," said Standring, "that he could not have done otherwise than he did. Your friendship—close as it is, and ought to be, (for I am aware of all you have done) dates only from a few weeks. I have known him for years. Be generous and let bygones be bygones."

Jack looked at Standring, wondering why he should speak so seriously. Had he watched the expression which stole over Beckwith's face, he would have been more surprised.

"All right," he replied carelessly, "*I* spent a very jolly day, and so might he, if—but hang it, let's drop the subject. Where are you going to sleep, Beck?"

"On your sofa if you've no objection."

"No. You shall have my bed. You're not quite well yet. And look here," turning to Standring, "don't you stand on any sort of ceremony here. My rooms are Beckwith's, and his mine, you understand. And if you like to go to the theatres and that, why—"

"I will ask you to be my companion. I perfectly understand and thank you," replied Standring. "It is lonely work going to such places alone, and I must confess they have a great charm for me. I was never allowed to see a play when I was a boy. I went to one last night, which moved me more than anything I ever saw."

"What was that?"

"I don't know even the name. I strolled into a theatre somewhere in the Strand, in the middle of the performance. I must go again to learn the story of the play. All I know of it is, that a man who had evidently been well known and liked, came back to his

town after an absence of twenty years, and no one—not even his own child—knows him.”

“Rip Van Winkle?”

“Yes, that was his name. I feel myself a sort of Rip Van Winkle here in England now; and when that poor fellow said that there was not a child in the village who did not once jump on his back, or a dog that did not wag its tail as he passed; but that then they ran from him in dismay, and the dogs barked at him, I—I made a fool of myself, Mr. Hill, and the people laughed at me.”

“Parcel of idiots!” Jack cried with contempt, “I’ve seen that play more than once, and your fine folks always laugh at the wrong place. I will do the pit and gallery justice. They feel the sentiment truly, and are not afraid to show what they feel. Why, old stager as I am, I have blubbered over such pieces as Grandfather Whitehead and the Porter’s Knot, and will again some day if they’re acted well. Only remember, Mr. Standring,” he continued, in a more serious tone, “‘all’s well that ends well.’ Rip ended by getting his rights, serving those he loved, and serving out his enemies in good style.”

“I have neither friends or enemies, Mr. Hill,” replied Standring; “but I thank you for the meaning of your words all the same.”

* * * *

Some hours before Jack's return, the letter from the fair but unreliable Adèle, stating that she had perfectly understood Mr. Abel Blisset, reached that person in the humble apartment which he had not yet abandoned. Means were not wanting, but he was too indolent to move. He contented himself at present by purchasing a few more ill-assorted and incongruous objects of luxury. A carpet which would have suited the boudoir of a duchess, now covered in part the floor of his attic, was too wide for it, and not long enough. He had a gold-mounted dressing-case and shaving tackle, only his soap dish was the cracked tin cup of former days. He had a rosewood writing table on which shone refulgent paper, weights, and blotting books sadly out of keeping with the penny stone bottle in which his pen was dipped. Nothing surrounding this man was ever complete.

"By God!" he exclaimed, as he read Adèle's letter. "Things go too well, too well with me. There's something awfully bad coming. When I've been at the worst almost without hope, I've had a turn of luck, but now—bah! what is the use of desponding. My tide of fortune is at the flood, and rising, rising, rising. Ha, ha, my pretty scornful Milly! Shall I catch your little heart on the bound. Jilted, eh; and for a fourth

rate dancer ? I will give you your revenge, pretty Milly, never fear. That high and mighty sister of your's may be far out of my reach ; but you ? When your blockhead of a father has got and spent his five-and-twenty thousand pounds, we will see. Son-in-law to a peer of the realm, the wealth that must and shall be mine will be worth something. Born a gentleman with the tastes and habits of a gentleman, I will win the position of one, or hang for it. Money ? Bah ! Do those dull city louts think that such a man as I am, cares to live as they live ? I'd sooner sweep a crossing. And you, my fine gentlemen, who think to give Abel Blisset the cold shoulder, because he once was poor, and is to be only rich presently ; look to yourselves. If I could speak out, is there one of you in ten who would not be proud of my pedigree ? Ah, ha, we shall see."

He paced up and down the room as he thus mused, with a very evil light in his eyes, even whilst his thoughts were most pleasant, his hopes most high. It was no use his building those castles in the air. The idea that something was coming which should sap their foundations, and blow them into space, came back too often for his peace ; came over him like the feeling one sometimes has in happy dreams, that they are only dreams after all ;

the feeling, worse still in the waking, when one dreams that a real sorrow or a danger has passed. The 'something' came sooner than he expected, and from a quarter in which he had not thought it would be brewing. It came from the "blockhead" Lord Hilton, and was contained in that triumphant letter of his in which he informed his dear Blisset that all trouble was at an end, for it could be proved beyond the possibility of doubt that Place-more had died childless.

* * * *

"I told you how it would be, old woman," said Martin Bloxam to his wife. "You see I've only got snubbed for my pains."

He had just shown her Lord Hilton's cold reply to his well-meant letter, and made the above observation when the indignant flush which lit up her face told him that she had read its contents.

"The impertinent upstart to write in this way to you," began Mrs. Bloxam, indignantly.

"Well, well, well," interrupted her husband, "hard words break no bones. We did what we thought right. I was wrong though to suppose that he had not changed. He has, and not for the better, evidently."

"Martin, no one on earth can ever make me believe that poor Julia deserves this treatment."

"Nor me either, old woman; but unfortunately it is not you and I that have to be

convinced of her purity. Bertram Ay—— Lord Hilton's idea that she was false to him is now nearly five-and-twenty years old, and an old root like that strikes deep. I am not surprised that he holds his own opinion, but he might have been a little less— well, what does it matter ? If I had the chance of trying to serve him again I would do so and risk my snub. I owe him a good deal, old woman. Do you remember that day when I was down with the fever yonder in Prosser's cottage, with the rain coming through the broken thatch, and the doctor saying I must live well, drink port wine and good soup, and we, with tenpence in the world, and not the hope of another farthing ?”

“ He was a Providence to us then, Martin, but—”

“ There should be no ‘buts’ about it. There, burn his stupid letter, and let's have no more about it. Tell me, has anything been heard about poor Maggy Grice ?”

“ Nothing, except—”

“ Well, except what ?”

“ I hardly like to say. I don't believe it,” said Mrs. Bloxam.

“ I dare say you are quite right, but what is this ‘it’ ?”

“ They say that Jack had something to do with her disappearance.

"Who says so?" asked the lawyer, sharply.

"The people at the Hall. They say that Jack met her in the fields the day of the cricket match, and gave her a letter. They say, too, that it was he who got Mrs. Prosser to persuade Grice to send her to London."

"Well, but who says so? Does Mrs. Prosser say so?"

"She does, indeed."

"What! that he was in correspondence with the girl?" cried Bloxam, aghast.

"No, no; only that he advised her being sent to London; but you know, Martin, we all thought that she ought to be sent from home."

"Who saw him give her that letter?"

"Simmonds, the under-butler at the Hall."

"So, then I suppose it's all over the village?"

"It is indeed. Don't you think you had better speak to Charles Dacres, and say that he had better ask Algernon Wray to be his best man. Under all the circumstances, it would never do for Jack to come here."

"Under all the circumstances, it would never do for him to keep away," replied Bloxam; "unless—but I won't believe that. No; let him be asked to stand by our Trix's husband on her wedding-day, and if he comes he's all right. Is there anyone in particular who makes this charge against him?"

"No, not that I know of. It seems to be the

general talk," said Mrs. Bloxam with a sigh.

"So much the worse. General talk is a slippery customer; but if Jack does come, we'll tackle him."

"Perhaps Jack does not know what he is accused of. Would it not be just to tell him, Martin?"

"Right, old woman, as usual. I'll tell him all he need know. Has Charley written yet?"

"No; Jack has not answered Alice's letter. Don't you think that looks rather odd?"

Bloxam's face darkened a little.

"The boy was holiday making, and—by Jove, wife, when did he go to the Isle of Wight?"

"I cannot say. Little Constance wrote that he was there in the middle of September."

"And Maggy Grice went away in August?"

"On the 29th."

"Well, that does not help us much. Tell Charley to let me know when he writes, and I will add a line."

See here now, what comes of being careless and not answering your letters. Jack, whose heart was always at Sea-View, put off answering his friend Alice Bloxam's letter till he forgot all about it. If he had only known that little Con had been invited to be one of the bridesmaids? But little Con demurely kept silence, and the good-for-nothing's neglect weighed woefully against him. Dacres

not unnaturally sought another best man, and Bloxam felt more than he expressed, as day after day passed without any letter from Jack. He took Prosser into his counsels, and learned from him all the gossip of "The Horn." It took a good deal to turn the cronies there assembled against Jack, but they had turned. One thing puzzled the lawyer. He could not find out who had originated the scandal, and yet it was supported by circumstances—most of them trivial taken separately—which had been put together with some skill.

"Old woman," he said to his wife, one morning after he had read his correspondence, "I must go to town to-morrow about that Poor Law case; I'll see that fellow Jack, if I have time, and know the worst."

He found time, indeed he made it, for the Poor Law case was not pressing. He sought Jack's number in Clement's Inn: as he was mounting the stairs, a lady dressed in rustling silks passed him. As he stepped out of the way of her train, their eyes met. It was Maggy Grice! The good old lawyer went home with a heavy heart, and his household were told that night that there was a name which was not to be mentioned under that roof again—and that name was Jack Hill!

CHAPTER XI.

HOW MISS FRENCH BECAME A WIDOW.

THE Salt-Cellar Makers' Company is not one of the most showy of our City guilds. They do not give grand dinners to people who do not invite them in return, or splendid balls to ladies who would cut the alderman's wife and daughters in the Park. They are a substantial, thriving Company, for all that, and their charities yield to no other companies, either in extent or good management; and one of the best of them is their school, (so they call it, but it is really a nursery) for orphan infants. No imposing structure of red and white bricks, tortured into Gothic forms, such as are always stuck on railway embankments, and have their portraits published in the *Illustrated London News*, honoured these friendless little ones; but a simple farm-house, hid away in the shady lanes which lie between Hendon and Harrow. We are a very charitable nation—none more so—but we dearly love to advertise our good deeds, and make even thê bricks and mortar

shout out half a mile off. "Look here ! This is a charity ! All these old men and women are kept on charity. All these little boys and girls are being educated on charity ! Come and taste our charity soup ! Examine our charity classes. Read the speeches at our last grand charity dinner. This is a charity. Hooray !"

A critical observer would not fail to remark that a larger number of children than fall to the lot of even an agricultural labourer, played about in the little garden which divided the farm-house in question from the road, (they wore no charity uniforms) and there were people living within a mile of it who knew nothing of its character or history. The immediate governing body consisted of a matron, a big girl (late of the workhouse) who helped her, and an old man who milked the two cows, and did odd jobs about. The governed numbered some dozen children, of both sexes, ranging in age from one to five years, some sickly, some in boisterous health, some pleasant to look at and deal with, and some quite the reverse ; but all well cared for.

The matron was a woman of about thirty years of age, who had evidently been possessed at one time of considerable personal attractions. If I say that she had now a *washed out* air, I am afraid I may be accused

of slangy writing; but I know of no phrase that so exactly expresses what I mean. It was not ill health that had worn away her beauty—for she was strong and active. Nor some sudden sorrow—for she had a pleasant smile. Nor want—for she had never known what that was. Still her cheeks were pale and her hair was thin, and when the pleasant smile was not playing, her looks were very sad.

They kept early hours in the little farmhouse. The children went to bed, as children should, betimes; and the big girl had enough to do in the day to make her glad to follow them at no long interval, to the land of nod. The man of odd jobs did not sleep on the premises, and the matron sat up quite alone one dark October night, reading by the light of a shaded lamp, with no sound but the beating of the rain on the window, to draw her attention from the book before her.

She read, and read, and read; for the work interested her till nearly midnight, and was then reluctantly about to close the volume, when a shadow fell upon the page, and looking up she saw a man standing before her. She fell on her knees, and gasped rather than cried.

“Oh, God! at last!”

The man's lips formed the word “hush!”

but seeing that she remained overcome with terror, he leaned over her and said in a low whisper.

"I know what you mean, Harriet, but do not be afraid. It is I—in the flesh. This is not your 'manifestation.'"

She gave one horrid glance into his face, and rose slowly trembling from head to foot.

"They told me you were dead," she said wearily, "but I knew that could not be."

"They told me *you* were dead," said the man, "and I believed it, till yesterday."

"I am sorry for your disappointment. Why are you here?"

"Not to bandy recriminations, you may be sure. I have a good deal to say to you, Harriet, which you must hear; and as it would not, perhaps, suit you to be found in my company, be so good as to take such steps as occur to you to prevent our being disturbed."

"*I* have nothing to fear," she replied haughtily, "if you were. You are my husband."

"Hum—m. Perhaps I might not admit that."

"You dare not deny it!" she cried, flushing crimson, and starting to her feet.

"Hush, hush, pray! We have not met for more than ten years, and so you may be

excused for forgetting that there is very little I dare not do, when it suits my purpose."

"To deny your wife would be a useless villainy."

"Hard words, Harriet, hard words, as usual. Well, will you not ask me to take off my coat, and sit down. You see it is dripping."

"You can do as you please," she replied, wearily.

He took off his coat, and hung it before the fire. He drew a chair, and placed it opposite to where she sat.

"Have you no brandy?" he asked, with a shudder. "I am wet to the skin."

"What should I want with brandy? No."

"You are sure we shall not be overheard?"

"Quite sure; but do not let that lengthen your visit. I dare say, late as it is, you can get brandy at the railway station, if that is what you came for."

"You were more civil to your other visitors, Harriet."

"What other visitors?"

"The young man named Burridger, and the attorney named Champion, who were here lately, asking about me."

She turned deadly pale, and the cold scorn of her manner changed to an expression of fear, in which a faint trace, just a shadow,

as it were, of past affection, was blended.

"I have not done you any harm, Augustus, have I?" she asked, laying her hand upon his arm as she spoke. "You are not in danger from what I told them?"

"That will depend much on the result of what I have to say to you," he replied. "It will not be pleasant hearing, and I will make it as short as I can; but to do so, you must give me your undivided attention, and not interrupt."

"Go on."

"That is right. Now. Do you know what became of me when we parted?"

"No."

"I engaged as a clerk to a merchant at Hull. It was a low thing to do, but I had a working fit on me. Of course, I changed my name. A Placemore on a three-legged stool, copying out invoices, would never have done. I called myself James Yates. I was sent to York on business. I fell in with some officers of the —th Hussars quartered there, whom I had known in better times. I dropped the clerk, and re-assumed the gentleman, and to enable me to keep up that position for one week, I did that which sent me into the most horrid slavery for five long years."

"I do not understand you."

"I will not mince matters. I forged a bill of exchange on my employers, and was transported for fifteen years. By telling you this, I am putting myself entirely in your power, Harriet, because I mean to be perfectly open with you, and expect you to be fair and considerate to me. I cannot tell you," he continued with a shudder, "what I suffered during those five years. Fancy me, with my tastes and habits, working like a felon, chained to felons. Well, at last I escaped, with the brute who was linked to me, of course—for I could not keep anything secret from him. Did you not hear of the daring escape from Bermuda of the convicts Yates and Emlin?"

"I seldom see a newspaper."

"It was not badly carried out. I planned it all. Never mind how we got away, and as far as privation and toil go, suffered more in our wanderings than we did in the hulks; but we were *free*! Once I gave myself up for lost, for we had landed in an open boat on an uninhabited part of Venezuela, and in a moment of despondency I told Emlin who I was, and all about me. It was an idiotic thing to do, but did not turn out so badly in the end.

"We were found and saved from starvation by the Indians of the coast, and eventu-

ally got to Panama, where we parted, to my great relief. Emlin worked his way to California before the mast (for he had been a sailor); and a turn of luck at billiards (on a capital of nothing at all) gave me funds enough to go to Callao, where I got another place as clerk, under the name which I now bear. My experience, short as it was at Hull, made me acquainted with their mercantile jargon, and I did well. But what to me was a place, even as partner, among such money-grubbers in a South American Republic? I tell you, Harriet, that if any one could have assured me a fling of two years in London, I would have risked going back to the hulks when it was over.

“I led this life for about a year, when I was sent to Panama to see after some missing cargo, and there I again encountered the ruffian Emlin, with a belt full of gold from the diggings, and drinking as only a digger can drink. In vain I tried to avoid him, and to deny my identity with his convict-companion, Yates. Fortunately we were alone in my room at the hotel, when our first and only interview took place. He went out drunk as he came in, and—as I suppose to annoy me—*assumed my name*, and roamed from drinking-shop to drinking-shop, boasting that he was Sir Augustus de Barkham

Placemore. The next morning his dead body was found on the sea-shore. No, no, Harriet! don't shrink from me like that! I swear to you before God, I had no hand or part in his death! He must have fallen in his drunkenness and been drowned.

"At first my only thought was joy, that so damaging a witness against me was out of the way; but when I heard what he had been saying the night before, another flashed like lightning across my brain. If I could prove that the escaped convict Yates, *alias* Placemore, was dead, I—changed as I was in those miserable five years—would be safe, and might return to England, the only country fit for a man to live in.

"I helped to carry his body up to the town, and easily managed to slip into his pocket some papers (amongst others, two letters from you) which would go towards identifying him as my old self, and I was successful."

"Then you are not in danger, Augustus?" said the matron, who had been listening with eager interest to all he said. "You—you are greatly changed indeed. I—I suppose it was instinct more than anything that made me recognise you?"

"Many of those who knew me in other days are dead," he replied, "and the rest have forgotten me. I pass men in the street

every day whom *I* remember, and they take no notice. Besides, placed as *I* am now, no one would suspect. Yes, *I* think *I* am pretty safe, but you can make me more so."

"How? tell me how? *I* wish you no harm; and if you would only lead an honest life—"

"Never fear; *I* am doing that. And now to answer your question. A silly old spendthrift—but *I* am going too fast; *I* must go on with my story as things happened. *I* came back to England, and having left proofs behind me that *I* was dead, found out that *I* was the heir to an immense fortune."

"*I* always understood that your father died quite poor?"

"So he did; but under an old will, *I* had become next in, what lawyers call reversion to an estate of, *I* do not know how many thousands a year, after the death of an old lady, who may die any day."

"But if you claim this—"

"*I* acknowledge myself like an escaped convict. No doubt of that. There are those who can prove that Placemore was Yates, and Yates was Placemore. No, no, *I* give that up. *I* would not run the risk of seeing Bermuda again for fifty Chapel Hil—for fifty times the value of my reversion. That must pass."

“Then what do you wish me to do?”

“Listen!” he said, drawing his chair nearer to her. “A silly old spendthrift, who will have this very property, I being dead, wishes to borrow five-and-twenty thousand pounds on his reversion. Do you understand?”

“He is to repay the money when he gets the estate?”

“Exactly. Well, several astute lawyers have put their wise heads together, and agreed that it is quite certain that Augustus de Barkham Placemore is dead (for if he were not, no one would lend the old gentleman the money he wants), and some equally astute capitalist is willing to lend it on these representations. So far so good. Bob, one pestilent little scoundrel whom you have seen—”

“Mr. Burridger?”

“The same—is stupid enough to doubt the main fact, and is cunning and malicious enough to work up his doubts in a manner which may do me an immensity of harm. It was you who started those doubts in his mind by saying that you were sure I was alive, or you would have had some manifestation as you called it. A most silly thing to say, Harriet, as you must admit. There is, however, a good old proverb, Spanish I think, which runs, ‘Those who do, can undo.’

You have created Mr. Burridger's doubts ; it is for you to dissipate them."

"How?"

"Simply by agreeing with others older and wiser, and I may add, more interested than yourself, that Augustus de Barkham Place-more, once your husband, is dead."

"You would have me perjure myself."

"Not a bit of it. No one asks you to say more than that we have no child. That is perfectly true. The story of my death is made for you. All I ask is that you will not gainsay it."

The matron paused irresolute. She had loved him once. She had long ago given up his name. He was really dead to her, and nothing could bring them together again now. It was not much to ask.

He saw his advantage and continued :

"And look here, Harriet. The sort of life you lead here cannot be a pleasant one."

"It is not, I have much anxiety and trouble. If they would only leave the children with me I should not so much mind, but as soon as they grow up and like me, and any work becomes easy with them, they are taken away to the great schools at Northampton, and I have to begin anew with strange faces."

"I wonder you have stood it so long,"

said he, "you won't be able to stand it much longer. It must be terrible drudgery. Now, Harriet, be a sensible woman. I am well off now, will be a rich man soon. Of course I know we cannot be again what we were, but I can, and ought to provide for you. Give this matronship up, retake my name, and leave the rest to me."

"Impossible! How could I account for such a step?"

"Nothing easier. You married a scamp who was transported for forgery, you took your maiden name because you feared that his might debar you from honest employment."

"That is the truth."

"Excuse me. Hear me out. You gained such employment, and did your duty in it, until no less an authority than Mr. St. John Champion of the well-known firm of Champion, Son, and Day, informs you that your husband is dead. You then find that you are entitled to a sum in the funds, which renders it unnecessary for you to work any longer for your living."

"That is not the truth."

"I will *make* it so. For a baronet, my father died a poor man, but there must be something—indeed I know there *is*, which would go to his son, notwithstanding his crime, and from him descend to his widow.

To that 'something,' something more could be added without anyone being the wiser. In this way you would be able to live as you have a right to do; would escape this life of toil, and do me the inestimable service of appearing to the world as my widow. Harriet, you loved me once, for God's sake do this for me. Would you like to see me dragged back to the hulks? Will you drive me out of the honourable career in which I am engaged? I tell you plainly that if I am discovered, my blood will be on your head. I will never be taken alive."

"But the deceit, the deceit, Augustus. If I do not tell, I at least act a lie."

"You dear good Harriet! Did you scruple to act a lie when you came here as Miss French?"

"It was for a good purpose."

"And is not saving your husband from utter ruin and despair, encouraging him to lead an honest and useful life, a good purpose too?"

"Give me time to think over it," said the matron, wavering.

"Too much time has passed already. Champion was here three days ago. Remember it is on what he said that you must now act. Act at once, and what you do will not be questioned. Delay, and you will

be subject to all sorts of awkward questions. Send in your resignation to-morrow, buy yourself a black dress and a widow's cap—it will not be at all unbecoming to you, Harry. Go and live abroad, if you like, where no one will interfere with you; and, as I said before, leave the rest to me; remembering that you shall be well provided for without the drawback of a bad husband. Say, which will you be—Lady Placemore, with a thousand a year, or, Miss French the matron?"

The poor matron! What could she do? Her life was a hard one and monotonous. In her earlier days she had been accustomed to very different scenes. She was only a bar-maid when he married her, and her bringing up had not been of the best. It was a wonder that she could steady down enough to act as she had done. Her dream in marrying him was to become "a lady," and there she was a poor matron on thirty pounds a year. She might be "a lady" now. What could she do but yield?

But in yielding, a thought, a doubt, and thorough woman's thought and doubt came over her.

"You have not told me," she said, "who and what you are at present."

"It is best, I think, for us both, that you should not know," he replied. "I see what

you mean, and you are right. For the present take these notes, they cover fifty pounds, and before your resignation can be accepted, I will settle on you what will make you independent of any default of mine."

"You are quite wrong," she replied, putting aside the money. "I was not thinking of that. If I do as you ask, you will be free to marry, and—"

"Ah, I see. Well, I will be perfectly frank with you as I have been throughout. When I thought that you were dead—it was no fault of mine, remember, that I was deceived—I did intend to marry; but there is an end to that."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite."

"If I promise to act in all respects as you wish, will you agree that I am to be released from such promise the day you attempt to make any other woman your wife?"

"Good Heavens! Harriet, am I not enough in your power? You need no agreement from me to do as you please. Denounce me to-morrow if you like."

"There is only one thing that would make me denounce you, Augustus, and now you know what it is, only pray understand I should not do so for my own sake, but simply to save another from what I have suffered."

"Now that we have agreed that I am dead, I think you might let bygones be bygones, Harriet," said he, with a grim smile. "Anyhow, I will keep my word and talk business only. I have told you how your late husband is supposed to have ended his days; but you are not to pretend to know this. Bear in mind continually that you know nothing beyond what Mr. Champion has told, or will tell you. Refer any one who asks questions to him. He has recognised you as Lady Placemore, and that will be enough for most people. He has told you that I am dead, when my life would be eighty thousand a-year out of the pocket of his friend and client. You act wholly and solely on his representations. You cannot cite him too often as your authority. He will require you to make some declaration that we have had no child. Make him send you a copy of what you have to sign, and don't see him more than you can help. Let him *write* and keep the letters. So much for Champion. Burrigger must be treated differently. Harriet, I have a sort of presentiment that if evil comes upon me it will come through that man. Of all the vile treacherous reptiles that carry a sting, he is the vilest and most treacherous. I would rather have a bloodhound on my track than this creature; for the dog would give me a

chance to fight for my life, and he would not. Hold no communication with him whatever. That is the only safe course. He would worm something out of you if you were fifty times more cautious than any woman can be. Did you dream for a moment that it could do me any harm to say that you did not believe I was dead? No, I know you did not; and yet slight as was the hint, he took it, and I have reason to know is even now trying to work it out."

"You are acquainted with him, then?"

"Yes; it was through me that he found you out."

"And you talk to me of woman's want of caution!"

"Bah! I made him my tool. There was a reward offered for information about me, and I helped him to gain it."

"When you might have gained it yourself, under your assumed name!"

"You talk without thinking, Harriet. Cannot you see that by placing this little beast on my track, with the hope of a liberal reward before him, I tested the possibility of being able to come forward and obtain the estate?"

"I think I understand you now, but go on."

"If he, with all his cunning, could only find out that Augustus Placemore had

slipped out of notice and was not to be found, the missing man would have appeared when the right time came ; but if he could show that Placemore, the spendthrift, had changed into Yates the Forger, he would remain missing. Burridger did manage to prove this, and I steered my course accordingly."

"Oh, Augustus, how subtle you are ! If you had only employed your talents for some good purpose—"

"For God's sake, Harriet, don't preach !" he said, angrily, "I can stand anything but that. What have I done worse than others ? I forged a bill for three hundred pounds, and was found out. Come into the city to-morrow and I will show you men who have done as much, all but being found out, and who are now rolling about in their carriages, trusted and respected by all. Tell me I was a clumsy fool to get found out, and I'll agree with you ; but no preaching, please."

"I'm very weary," the matron said, "need we say any more to-night ? The rain is over I think, now," she added, after a long pause.

"I will trouble you no further," he replied, rising. "You may think of me as you please, Harriet, but be assured that I am deeply grateful for what you are going to do. Stay ! I must give you the address of my late

father's man of business." He wrote it in his pocket-book, and tore out the leaf. "Go to him as soon as you can and claim the heir-looms, there are a few old family jewels left, I know, and what else there may be; and meet me this day fortnight at three o'clock in the—let me see—yes, in the broad walk of the Regent's Park, that is as quiet a place as I can think of."

"I must give the Company at least a month's notice."

"True; but it is only reasonable that you should have leave of absence to look after your affairs. Promise to meet me."

"If I can, I will."

"Thanks. Your fire is quite out, but my great coat is dry. By the way, is it not dangerous to leave your outer door on the latch at night? There used to be a good many tramps on this road."

"I always lock it before I go to bed. I was up later than usual when you came. For heaven's sake do not walk so heavily, you will wake the children."

"My feet are numbed with wet and cold. You had better open the door for me. So—that's well. Good night, Lady Placemore," he said, with a meaning smile. "Good night."

And so they parted. He to loiter about in the darkness till it was safe for him to go

to the railway station without occasioning remark, she to seek her humble chamber with those words "Good night, *Lady Placemore*," ringing in her ears. It had always been her custom to pass through the dormitory, and see that her little charges were all sound asleep, before she retired to rest; but she did not do so this night.

Things turned out pretty much as Blisset had anticipated. In the course of a day or two the matron received a letter from Messrs. Champion, Son and Day, stating that it was of great importance to their client, the Earl of Hilton, that she should make a declaration in legal form that there had been no issue of her marriage with the late Augustus Placemore. His lordship would be sorry indeed if this should cause her any inconvenience under existing circumstances. He, for one, fully appreciated her motives for assuming her maiden name, and would take care that she should be no loser in any pecuniary manner by the service he requested. She replied that, after the information she had received from Mr. Champion (the correctness of which she now saw was indisputable) she had determined to claim whatever rights she had acquired as Sir Augustus Placemore's widow. She would have no objection to make the declaration, but begged to be furnished with

a copy of what she had to sign. Mr. Champion would be pleased to address her for the future as Lady Placemore, as further concealment would perhaps damage her interests.

“Does the woman think that she has any claim on the Chapel Hilton property, I wonder?” mused Champion, when he received her note. “Rights as Placemore’s widow! He could leave her nothing but a title, which will be rather in her way as the matron of an infant school. Stay! the old man died without a will, and may have left something.” He unlocked a drawer in his writing-table as he spoke, and took out a printed paper, the list of unclaimed stock laying in the Bank of England. “By Jove! here it is, one thousand seven hundred and eight pounds five and fourpence. She has lost no time. I wonder who put her up to this?”

The matron was in the act of writing the letter which caused these remarks, when she was honoured with a second visit from Mr. Burridger. She heard the click of the latch as he entered the garden, and had time to give the big girl the necessary orders before he gained the porch.

Bob gave her a friendly nod, and was passing on, when the big girl confronted him, and with rare truthfulness observed:

“Missis says she’s not at home.”

"Oh, but I've walked all the way from Edgware (Bob called it 'Edger') to see her. Tell her it's me, Mr. Burridger; she'll see me fast enough."

"Says she to me as you comed up the path, 'there's that Mr. Burridger a-coming,' she says, 'tell him I ain't at home, and let him go about his business.' Now, there!"

"She's got somebody with her."

"No, she ain't."

"Then who is the lady in the widow's cap I saw through the window?"

"Why missis, to be sure," replied the big girl, with some degree of scorn at his ignorance.

"In a widow's cap!" cried Bob aghast.

"People does gen'rally wear widow's caps when they're widows, don't they?" asked the big girl.

"But she—she—How long has she worn one?"

"What's that to you?"

"Look here, Mary—"

"My name ain't Mary; it's Martha."

"Well, then, Martha, look here. Have you ever had half-a-crown given to you?"

"Lord bless you!" replied the big girl, with lofty disdain, "why I gets five pounds a year, besides tea and sugar."

Bob saw that he must increase his bribe to

a young woman in such easy circumstances.

"I'll give you a—yes, I'll give you half-a-sovereign, Martha," he whispered, "if you will tell me who has been here since I last came."

"I shan't do nothing of the sort," she replied in a loud voice, "leastwise not now," she added in his ear. "Be in the lane round to the right of the paddock in half-an-hour." So saying, she slammed the door in his face before he had time to reply, and rejoined her mistress. "I never did see such impudence," she observed. "He would not be denied."

"You should not have stopped talking to him, Martha," said the matron. "If ever he comes again, don't open the door."

"Very good, mum, I won't."

"And, Martha, you'd better hang up the children's things to dry whilst it's fine."

"I ain't quite done wringing of 'em yet, mum; but I've got the lines up in the paddock all ready."

"Well, go on with your work, and don't disturb me again; I'm busy," said the matron resuming her writing.

"And a good job, too," observed the big girl to herself, as she left the room. If Jim would only be quick and come, the little uns would be sure to go and see him milk, and I should have a chance of earning that half

sovereign. What odds is it to any one if I let the gentleman know who's come? I des-say he can tell me what this 'ere thing is. It aint missis', *I know.*"

"This 'ere thing" (which Martha took from her pocket as she spoke) was what the Spaniards call "jesquero," the French "briquet," the Turks "chek-mek," a small gold box with a steel edge, containing a piece of flint, and having a long orange-coloured cord rolled round it, the end of which lights at the slightest spark from the flint. Such a thing is common enough in climates where fusees spoil, but there are a good many people in England not wiser than was the big girl as to its use.

She had found it in the Matron's room as she cleaned up the grate one morning, just where anything might have fallen from a coat that had been hung to dry before the fire.

Jim, the doer of odd jobs, came a-milking as usual, and thought it not strange that such of the "little uns" as could walk should be left in his charge, whilst Martha went into the paddock to hang up the things to dry.

She earned her half-sovereign over the gate which led into the lane, and more than words passed that barrier. Her workhouse training had not taught her that what she found was not her own. Mr. Burridger

became the owner of the "jesquero," which he declared to be brass, for five shillings.

"If it's Champion's," mused that worthy as he walked back to "Edger," "why is it engraved with 'L?' I'll pump him about it, and if it isn't his'n, why, then some one has bin here unbeknown to Martha."

CHAPTER XII.

JACK IN TROUBLE.

WHEN I was a child, it was thought a lamentable thing to have half-a-crown, and not to be able to go out immediately and spend it; but I am given to understand that the young gentlemen of the present day are wiser than their parents—in the half-crown age at any rate. Familiarity breeds contempt, say the copy-books. Be this as it may, no child, where there were children, could be more eager to spend his two-and-sixpence than was Lord Hilton to get to the end of his five-and-twenty thousand pounds. Had he followed Champion's advice, he would have appropriated the odd five thousand to pay off simple debts, about eight more to redeem outstanding bonds and mortgages, have spent some two in making a part of Hilton Castle habitable, and kept the rest to eke out his income until old Mrs. Eagleton should be gathered to her fathers. When a certain person was ill, he made certain vows, and as soon as he got well, we know how he

kept them. Bertram, Lord Hilton, with his pockets empty, pressed almost to insult by his butcher and his tailor, with his acceptances flying about amongst the Jews, was prepared to meet all his engagements if the money could only be raised. How happy he would be in paying away the last sixpence that would make him a free man ! But Bertram, Lord Hilton, with his balance of five-and-twenty thousand pounds at his bankers, was as different as the certain person before indicated, on his recovery. One of the notorieties of the Regency—I think Pea Green Hay—stated that he had frittered away three fortunes, paying bills. To order is delightful, to pay disgusting. Lord Hilton satisfied the butcher and the tailor, but with money in his hand that cost him only twenty per cent, he let bonds and bills run on, on which he was paying thirty, simply because he could not bear to part with ready money.

He began to restore the Castle with the most economical intentions ; but it grew upon him, as such things will grow, and when Messrs. Crace's bill came in, and the accounts of the famous landscape gardener had to be paid, he found that he was just as far from being a " free man " as ever. If you had given him a hundred and twenty thousand pounds to-day, he would have

had duns about his door in six months.

Sea-View was given up, and a house in Park Lane taken for three years. Hilton Castle was to be ready by Christmas, when a grand house-warming was to be given. It was from the former residence that the Earl carried out his intention (communicated to Mr. Blisset) of making Jack, the good-for-nothing, his private secretary. He could write a very good letter when he liked, and that which contained this offer gave our hero some little trouble.

"Look here, Beck," he said, tossing the note to his friend; "read that."

Beckwith read it, and tossed it back again.

"Well?" asked Jack.

"Well!" replied Beckwith.

"Have you read it?"

"Yes."

"Then what do you think of it?"

"Simply that a lord wants you to be his secretary, offers you three hundred a year (which is good pay as such things go), gives you the run of the house, and promises (indirectly) that you shall be treated like a gentleman, though you are to be only—secretary."

"I don't want you to tell me what he writes, man!" said Jack. "I can read for myself. Advise me what I ought to say in reply; what I ought to do."

Beckwith paused, and took several long pulls at his pipe. "Well, Jack," he said at last, "I will advise you, though I know what advice goes for. If you like it, you will take it; if you don't, you won't."

"I have great confidence in your judgment, old man."

"Thank you. Now then for it. You ought to refuse this offer, for two reasons, and I'll put the worst foremost. You can make more than three hundred a-year as you are going on."

"But the position, Beck—the position."

"That's just my second point. Lord Hilton has received you in his house as his equal (for a peer cannot be more than a gentleman, and he has treated you as one). You have become so intimate as to permit yourself to call his daughters by their christian names. He called you 'Jack' in my presence. Do you think that, as his paid secretary, you are to talk about 'Mary,' and 'Milly,' and be called 'Jack?'"

"I like him, Beck, notwithstanding all his faults, and I think he likes me," pleaded Jack.

"People like their friends; they are satisfied or not with their secretaries."

"I don't think he would treat me exactly as a secretary."

"So much the worse for you. There's no use mincing matters, Jack. You're hankering after one of those girls."

Jack flushed crimson. "You've no right to say that, Beckwith; we are capital friends, they are very jolly girls, and all that; but—but—"

"Pshaw! man. Give it up—give it up," Beckwith said, turning round his chair with the air of one convinced. "If you will make a fool of yourself, do it with your hands untied. Go your ways as you are, and you will only be shown the door; take the secretaryship, and you will be kicked downstairs."

"I should like to see any one try!" cried Jack, flaring up.

"My dear fellow," replied Beckwith, "there are kicks and kicks, and the man who wrote that letter is capable of giving you a kick with his tongue, which would hurt you more than if Gladiateur had lashed out at you. It is only in school-girls' novels that secretaries marry the Earl's daughters."

"Who's talking of marrying earls' daughters?"

"Well, no one is *talking* of it," replied Beckwith, drily.

"You mean to insinuate that I'm thinking of such a thing?"

"Look here, Jack, you asked my advice

about this Secretaryship, and you know what it is. I can see that you had half made up your mind to accept it; and if I had said, 'by all means do so—it is the best thing in the world for you,' you would have thought me a second Daniel come to judgment, and have quoted me triumphantly against anyone who gave you contrary counsel. As it is, if the beadle down yonder were to tell you to accept Lord Hilton's offer, you would think him a wiser man, and a better friend than I am. Go your way, Jack, and God help you!"

He had taken the measure of Jack's mind to a line. He wanted to accept Lord Hilton's offer, but not being quite able to stifle certain doubts as to the propriety of doing so, he wanted to be advised that it was all right. It is so comfortable to be told that it is all right (never mind who is the teller) when the still, small voice of one's conscience whispers that there is something wrong. Advice is mighty pleasant when it jumps on the side to which one's wishes bend. A month ago, Jack would as soon have thought of making a confidant of the beadle as of Van Wyan; but something told him that he could get what he wanted from that politic gentleman. This, he would not admit even to himself. He argued that Van Wyan knew a good

deal more than an old cynic like Beckwith could know about such things; and to Van Wyan he went.

"My *dear* fellow," said Van, when Jack had told his story, "I congratulate you. It is a splendid opening. Goodness only knows what it may lead to. Give me your hand, my *dear* Hill. Accept at once. If Hilton takes a fancy to you, as of course he will do, he'd get you into Parliament, and you cannot fail to obtain some first-rate post. Oh, accept at once. You can give it up when something better offers."

This was going a little too far. Jack did not look beyond the Secretaryship. Stupid fellow that he was! the idea of making his would-be patron into a cat's-paw did not please him. He had lived too little in the great world to know the real value of the ladder. If Van Wyan had only said, "accept at once," without giving those plaguy reasons.

Well, there was balm in Gilead yet. He had another counsellor—pleasant Mrs. Clair, who had been such a good ally at Guildenbury Park, and whose remonstrances against the life he had been leading, prior to his visit to Southerton, had borne good fruit. Late in October came Black Monday for Clair, Q.C., and Jack had made himself a welcome guest some time before the moment arrived

in which Lord Hilton's proposal had perplexed him.

"If that young man were at the Bar," said the Q.C. to his wife, one Saturday, when the Courts being "up," he had time to take a constitutional with her in the Park, "he would make his mark. He is wonderfully quick in taking up a case. I talked with him, just whilst I smoked a cigar after dinner, about the new Bankruptcy scheme; and there is an article in to-day's *Censor*, evidently his, by far the best that has been published on the subject, though, of course, he has not mastered all the details."

"Lord Hilton has asked him to be his private secretary," said Mrs. Clair, somewhat proudly, for she liked to hear the good-for-nothing spoken well of.

"Then I only hope he will have the good sense to decline the offer," said the Q.C.

"Do you really think he ought to do so, dear?"

"Of course. He would get weary and disgusted in a month. He would get up very good speeches for Hilton, and that sort of thing at first, but would soon get tired and careless. Do you think that I, or anyone else, would care to work if another man were to get all the credit for my brains? No. Jack Hill is vain—vain as a young fellow

ought to be ; for vanity, taking it all in all, is a good spur, and he is better as he is."

"I am sorry you think so, dear, for I had half advised him to accept. I saw he wished to do so."

"Hum! wasn't he staying with them at the Isle of Wight?" asked the Q.C.

"No, not staying with them. He saw a great deal of them though, and Lord Hilton took quite a fancy to him."

"Then let him help him in some other way. My dear Gerty, don't you see Lady Brentford bowing to you?"

The following Sunday Jack dined at the Clairs, and one short sentence spoken by his hostess drove Lord Hilton and secretaryships out of his head.

"Of course you are going to the wedding, Jack?"

"What wedding?"

"Why Beatrix Bloxam's." (Why are weddings always spoken of as the bride's, surely the happy man is married too).

Jack's conscience smote him. He remembered Alice's unanswered letter, and got a little hot, as one will do when such neglects are suddenly brought to memory.

"Oh, of course, Alice told me she would write again when the day was fixed."

"Why, it is to be next Wednesday."

"Impossible!"

"Well, I am going down to papa's to-morrow, and as Charles Dacres is staying at the Park, he ought to know."

Jack had not a word to say, but there was that in his manner which gave Mrs. Clair a hint to change the subject.

When they were alone in the drawing-room, (the Q.C. having to work, Sunday night as it was) she, noticing that something was amiss with the good-for-nothing, asked,

"How long ago is it since you answered Alice's letter?"

"Like a fool I never answered it at all," said Jack, "I—I—was busy. I mean I had other things to think of, I hate letter writing. She asked me to come to the wedding, and said she would write again when the day was fixed, and she didn't," he continued in an injured tone.

"And you never even wrote a line to Beatrix to wish her joy?"

"I am sorry to say I forgot, I—"

"Your friend was very ill, I suppose?"

"No, hang it! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Clair," blundered Jack, "it wasn't that. He was well enough. I didn't write because—because I put it off and off till I forgot it. I waited till they should write again."

"You have offended them."

"I am afraid I have. That's what hurts me. I would walk down barefoot to throw an old shoe after dear little Trix. I don't care a straw about the breakfast and that—I shouldn't like them to think I did not feel glad, and—and—"

"Well, I daresay I shall see Mr. Bloxam to-morrow," said Mrs. Clair. "He is in town now, making some arrangements. I will say—"

"Just let him know that it was all a piece of confounded stupidity on my part," interrupted Jack, "that's all, please. Don't give him the idea that I wanted to be asked. You see, Mrs. Clair, that—hang it! I don't know what to say."

It was quite true, he did not; but Mrs. Clair's woman's tact accounted for his silence.

The next evening as Jack was smoking his *post prandial* pipe, he received the following note by a Commissioner.

"Dear Jack,

"If you cannot accuse yourself of having done anything wrong that should make your Southerton friends unwilling to see you, take a cab and come here at once. You will see Mr. Bloxam,

"Your's sincerely,

"GERTRUDE CLAIR."

For a moment Jack was fairly bewildered;

then he began to search for reasons for so extraordinary an invocation, and, as usual, hit upon the most unlikely reason first. Did they know that he loved Constance Conway? Had he gone too far with Alice Bloxam? His heart was so full of the former, that he could think of no cause unconnected with her. A little consideration would have shown him that as no one, not even little Con herself, knew that he loved her, the consequential crime of being false to some one else could not be imputed; but people, like our good-for-nothing do not consider, under such circumstances. Ideas do certainly flash across their minds and plague them for the moment, and then they jump into a Hansom cab, or take similar speedy means of getting at the truth.

When he met Martin Bloxam in the dining-room, and Martin Bloxam did not hold out his hand, Jack felt that somehow or other he must have done something awfully bad; but when his old friend had stated in the presence of Mr. Clair (the lady of the house had retired) why Jack could be Jack to him and his no longer, the good-for-nothing burst out laughing.

It was a wrong, perhaps an unfeeling thing to do, when all was considered; only Jack, as usual, did not consider, and it was well

for him that he did not. When a man assumes lofty indignation in the Joseph Surface strain, it is open for such old practitioners as Clair, Q.C., and Martin Bloxam to doubt the value of his protestations. If he stand mute, and take time to reply, they may draw their own conclusions as to the value of his defence when it comes out. But when one against whom you have only one charge to make, and that a charge, which, if true, would strike to the very bottom of his heart, burst out laughing when it is made, as naturally as Jack did—sensible folk like Clair, Q.C., and Martin Bloxam will find a reason for ever such mistimed merriment, and see that the accused was not merry at the charge, but only at the idea that it should be made against him. But when Martin Bloxam went further and stated the reasons on which the accusation was founded, Jack grew grave.

“Will you tell me, Mr. Bloxam,” he said, “who brings this charge against me?”

“That I cannot do.”

“You cannot, or you will not?”

“I cannot, because there is no accuser in particular. The whole village believes it.”

“Hard lines for me,” replied Jack bitterly, “but I suppose if I convince you and Grice that will do?”

"I should imagine so," was Bloxam's answer. He was somewhat disappointed that Jack had not begun his defence.

"Now look here," continued the good-for-nothing, "I suppose you will believe me when I say that I did not come here with cut and dried proofs against a charge which I never dreamt of ten minutes ago?"

"We are not sitting here as your judges, Mr. Hill. You are not obliged to give us any proof," said Bloxam stiffly.

"That be hanged!" blurted out Jack. "Do you think I'm going to let you, or any other man living call me a blackguard, as you have done, by implication at least, and not either knock him down, or convince him he is wrong. I can't knock you down, Mr. Bloxam, because—because" (here something rose in his good-for-nothing throat and prevented him from finishing the sentence). "But—(something, me)"—Jack was getting excited, "if I don't convince you."

"I think it only fair that Mr. Hill should have time," began the Q.C.

"Five hours of daylight, that's all I want," said Jack rising, "only let me know exactly what I have to answer. Imprimis, I met the girl in Guilderbury Park the day of the cricket match, and gave her a letter. Then I got my old nurse to persuade her parents

to send her to London. There she was met coming down my staircase. Is that all?"

"There are some minor circumstances, but what you have mentioned are the principal points," answered Bloxam.

"Very well," said Jack, "I did meet her in Guilderbury Park, but gave her no letter. I did get my old nurse to advise her parents to send her away from home; but with no such view as is attributed. She was met coming down my staircase, for Mr. Bloxam says he saw her; but I give you my word of honour that she never entered my door. Take this much as an instalment of what you shall know to-morrow at—what time do you leave town to-morrow?" This to Bloxam.

"At three o'clock."

"At two, then. Be so good as to tell Mrs. Clair what I have said, so far, and goodnight."

"You're on the wrong scent, Bloxam," said the Q.C. after a long pause, during which they had filled their glasses, and the hall door had closed on Jack.

"I hope so—I do really hope so. Poor fellow, he seems to feel it."

Seems! Jack might have answered with Hamlet, "it *is*, I know not 'seems.' " Mrs. Clair had told him the night before that Constance was to be one of the bridesmaids. Need I say more?

Jack walked back to his chambers, and there arrived, set about doing that which a casual observer would have set down as several very senseless things. He turned out all his untidy drawers, and tossed their contents aside in the wildest confusion. He treated his writing desk equally badly. He searched his book-case, his cupboard, and his waste-paper basket. He undid the spills which good Mrs. Jowers had made him to light his pipe, and examined the paper of which they were composed. Then he sat down, and lit his pipe and considered awhile; till a thought struck him, and he strode into his bed-room and began to toss about his clothes, much as he had tossed about his letters, and papers, and books a quarter of an hour ago. As he dragged out a pair of old flannel trousers, something crackled in the pocket.

"At last!" he said, with a long sigh of relief, as he drew forth a pink envelope, with the words "My own Margôt," written thereon in a crumpled, but characteristic hand.

The house in which Jack lived was divided into seven sets of chambers. On the ground floor, was the office of Messrs. Trite and Slowman, Architects. On the first floor to the left, lived Cornelius Van Wyan; and to the right, Mr. Trab, a stockbroker. The second floor to the right was unlet, and to

the left was Jack's own domain. Higher up Beckwith reigned supreme. Now, Bloxam had met Miss Grice coming down stairs. It was clear, therefore, that she had not visited Messrs. Trite and Slowman. Jack caught Mr. Trab at breakfast, and much to that staid old bachelor's dismay, requested to be informed as a personal and important favour, if a lady dressed in a blue silk with black velvet trimmings, a white bonnet and China crape shawl—the description given by Bloxam, of Maggy Grice—had business with him at about four o'clock on the afternoon of the 18th ultimo. The old gentleman blessed his heart, and replied that all the world knew that he dined in the city, and was never home till eight o'clock. Jack thanked him, begged his pardon for giving so much trouble, and went up to Beckwith. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to say that he knew nothing of any lady in a blue silk dress.

"Suppose she did really come to see me after all," mused Jack, "when I was out. She could not have anything to say to Van Wyan."

Nevertheless, he knocked at that gentleman's door, and got no response. He called again in an hour's time with the same result. Another hour—no Van Wyan. Jack grew fidgety, as two o'clock came. True, he had

something to show Mr. Bloxam, but not what he wanted, and the idea grew stronger and stronger that behind Van's closed door he might find what he sought. Highly methodical persons have to pay on occasion for their method. Had Van Wyan called on Jack and found his oak sported for half a day, he would have thought nothing of it, but Van Wyan was regularity itself. He was always at home till four o'clock, when he sauntered down to his club to read the paper, show himself, when it was the season, and dine. I don't mean to say that because Jack could not find him at his regular hour, he concluded that he must have received a lady in a blue silk dress three weeks ago, only somehow or other Jack's conviction that it could not be Van, became weaker and weaker as the day passed on.

At last, when Van did return, Jack took the bull by the horns.

"I'm going to ask you rather a queer question, Van?" he began.

"My *dear* fellow, you know I am always so glad to be of any assistance to you," was the reply.

"What did that young lady in blue silk and a white crape shawl want with you on the 18th of last month?"

Van Wyan's placid countenance changed.

"This—this is no matter for a joke, Mr. Hill," he said, pompously.

"You're quite right there," replied Jack, "it isn't, at least to me."

"If it were not for the great regard I have for you, I should call it an impertinence."

"Call it what you like, old man," said Jack, "but look here. I was wrong to put it as I did. It does not matter a straw to me what she wanted with you, or you with her. Some wise folks have got it into their heads that she came to see me, and they've drawn conclusions which are most painful. Now, like a good fellow, just write me a little note, and say that she was your visitor and not mine."

"I will do nothing of the sort, Mr. Hill."

"Oh, yes you will. Why, man alive, what harm can it possibly do you? Besides, of course I can get it out of the girl, and I warn you that if I do, I'll chaff your life out."

"You know her, then?"

"Lord bless you! Ever since she was that high."

The threat of being "chaffed" was a dreadful one for Van Wyan. The perspiration stood on his forehead, and he moaned, half aloud, "Oh, Lord! this comes of meddling with other people's affairs."

"What do you want me to write?" he asked aloud.

"Simply this—that the lady in question came to see you, and that, to your knowledge, she never entered my doors. I pledge you my word, Van, that your note shall only be seen by one person, and that he will not mention its contents."

"Who is that one person?"

"Mr. Bloxam."

"And who is he?"

"A friend of mine, whom you never saw, and probably never will see. To be frank with you, Van, he thinks I brought the girl up to town. One day coming to see me, he met her on the stairs. Now, do you understand?"

"I give you my word that she came up here solely and entirely on business."

"Of course. Business let it be."

"It *was* business."

"Very well, say so. I know more than you suppose about this affair, Van," Jack added, in a more serious tone. "Do what is right, and keep yourself out of the row that's coming."

A good deal of fencing took place between these two, which ended in Van Wyan consenting to write a note, stating that the wearer of the blue silk dress had called on him on the day in question on business; but he would not write it there and then. Jack

should have it the first thing in the morning, and it being then late (for Van Wyan had not returned till after his dinner and usual club evening), Jack agreed. He could not push his advantage too far.

If there was one thing more than another that Van Wyan loved, it was to be consulted (by the upper ten, of course) in "delicate affairs," amongst which, I am sorry to say, were included some with which less inquisitive persons would not like to soil their fingers. He took a pride in his knowledge of such things, and revelled in that social sewerage which goes by the name of "on dits" and scandals.

He was a very methodical person, conducted his extensive correspondence on rule. He wrote his little notes, and placed them in a row on the right hand side of his writing table. He directed his envelopes, and laid them in corresponding files on his left. He wrote two letters soon after Jack had left him, and, whether the horrid fear of being "chaffed" disturbed the usually equal flow of his ideas, or some puff of wind from an open door disturbed the directed envelopes, I cannot say. Certain it is, that the note which was intended for Jack, under the reservations agreed upon, was posted next morning, directed to Algernon Wray, Esq.,

Guilderbury Park ; and Jack received a very different epistle to that which he expected. Under all the circumstances, I think he was justified in reading it. It ran as follows :

“ — Club.

“ My Dear Algernon,

“I think it right to tell you that a neighbour of mine—a noisy person with whom I have a very slight acquaintance, has been making inquiries about a certain young lady who was so imprudent as to call here last month. In a case like yours, my dear Algernon, I deem it my duty, not only to you, but to the society in which we both move, to do all in my power to free you from the snare in which—pardon me—your thoughtless impetuosity had plunged you ; and only yesterday I succeeded, after infinite trouble, in obtaining, at a fair price, the letters which were relied on as containing an offer of marriage. I congratulate you on so satisfactory an escape. A gamekeeper’s daughter ! What could you have been thinking of ?

“ You are to pay £200 down, and the same annually till the lady marries ; and as the formal arrangement is not yet signed, you must permit me to add as a condition, that no more visits are to be paid to me under any circumstances. They are so very compromising.

"Pray make it convenient to come up to town towards the end of the week.

"Yours very sincerely,

"CORNELIUS VAN WYAN.

"Algernon Wray, Esq."

Van Wyan always wrote on club paper, and had a stock of it in his chambers.

In the note which Jack *ought* to have received, Mr. Van Wyan presented his compliments and begged to state that Miss Grice called upon him on business on the 18th October, about four o'clock in the afternoon; and that, so far as he knew, she had not gone up to Mr. Hill's apartment.

Jack was quite content with what he got, and one of the first trains which started from the London Bridge Station carried him once again into the pleasant fields of Kent.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAPTAIN DACRES' BEST MAN.

THE other Mrs. Conway, who lived inside the delicate lady whom society knew by that name, and broke out occasionally when there was no one but her child or her servant to see, or suffer thereby, found no difficulty in permitting Constance to accept the Bloxams' invitation. She saw that the time was rapidly approaching when some great change in their mode of life would have to be made. The girl was becoming perfectly unmanageable—and so in truth she was with regard to Mrs. Conway's peculiar mode of management. If she was only old enough to marry! sighed her mother. If she could be thrown back on her father! But to do so, would be to admit that he was a fit person to have the charge of a young girl, and that would never do. The pupil-teacher scheme would never do either; but a tacit agreement was made between mother and daughter that on the return of the latter from Southerton, *something* was to be done.

The Mrs. Conway known to society, gave

out that it was with the greatest possible reluctance she had allowed her child to become Beatrix Bloxam's bridesmaid.

"My dearest Gertrude knows," she wrote (for the Willertons had left the Isle of Wight by this time, and she had gone back into her usual lodging-house life) "the sacrifices I have made for the dear child, and how very *gauche* and backward she is notwithstanding. I am really quite ashamed that she should go into society as she is, and fear that I must send her to some first-rate *pension* abroad for a year or two, though I dare not think how I shall be able to live without her."

She wrote in a somewhat similar strain to Mrs. Bloxam, in answer to her invitation. They were so good to take notice of her little girl. She was sure they would be indulgent. Dear Mrs. Bloxam would understand what a mother felt in parting with her only treasure, &c. She knew Constance too well to suppose that she would say a word against her, only it was well to be prepared. She might unconsciously throw out some hint that she was not happy at home, and with a parent who could write so feelingly, of course it would be considered that she had only herself to blame.

Arrived at the Priory, little Con thought that she could find no pleasanter topic than

their mutual friend Jack Hill—his sayings and his doings, how much he had polished up, and what great things he had done and was going to do in the world of letters. She did not at first notice the dead silence and averted looks with which his name was received, but rattled on in praise of her hero, till good Mrs. Bloxam was obliged to take her aside, and to tell her that Mr. Hill had behaved in a very dishonourable manner, and that it was her husband's wish, and hers too, that his name should not be mentioned in their house.

Poor little Con was too surprised and bewildered to ask a question just then. She sought an explanation from her friend-in-chief, Alice, afterwards, and got a hazy account of what Jack had done. Those country-bred girls could not fathom the depths of his supposed crime.

"Do you believe this, Alice?" she asked.

"Dearie, I must," was the sorrowful reply. "There is not a juster man in the world than papa, and he was very fond of Jack—of him. Besides, you know papa is a lawyer, and not easily persuaded. He did everything to clear this up, and it got worse and worse as he went on."

Tell a woman who loves a man that he has been seen by unimpeachable evidence to

come out of a room in which one was found recently stabbed, with a bloody knife in one hand and the victim's purse in the other, and she will not be brought to believe that he has committed a murder. Give her proof upon proof that he is guilty of every crime in the decalogue, and she will assure you that there must be some mistake. He has enemies, he is misunderstood, and so on. But breathe the slightest hint that he loves another woman, and for some reason which I cannot pretend to explain, she believes you at once.

— "though guilt, though shame,
Were on thy name,
I'd still be true,
But that heart of thine, should another share it,
I could not bear it,
What would I do?"

Asks the lady in the song ; and she is only one in ten thousand who would feel in the same way.

Poor little Con ! It was no matter of surprise to her that Jack should win any girl. What could she know of the sort of love he was supposed to have won Miss Grice with ? How could she realise the sort of life they were supposed to be leading. Her idea was that he had stolen her away from her home by an unworthy trick, and had married her without the consent of her friends. After

all, he would make her happy. She could not help being happy with him. Why were they so hard upon him ?

The true, tender heart hid its own deep wounds. She had resolved to take Alice Bloxam into her full confidence, and if necessary, Jack, as one who might be able to help her to find her father. She had one friend the less now. Often and often had she been on the point of trusting in Mary Aylwarde, but had not the courage to broach the subject. She loved Mary, had given her many half hints, and would have spoken out at the slightest opening from her. Had she said one half as much to Alice Bloxam, that plain-spoken damsel would have told her to speak out, without dreaming what was to come. Mary, who more than half-guessed what was the matter, nipped in the bud, out of sheer delicacy and fear of being thought to force confidence, the flower she hoped to rear. Such was the difference between the two friends of little Con. If she had only blunt Alice to help her out with her sorrow, and clever Mary to advise her afterwards, Jack being in the distance to act for them as might be requisite. She had quite made up her mind that she was to find her father, and that happier days were to come, even for her other parent : only it seemed to her very sad

indeed that Jack could have no hand in the good work.

Sir Thomas Wray was not a man to do things by halves. Though only a distant relation of Charles Dacres, and holding a position far above the father of his bride, he resolved that the wedding should not want for *éclat*, so far as he was concerned; first, because he took a family pride in Charley; secondly, because of the good esteem and regard he had for the Bloxams; and thirdly, because of his own jovial disposition. There was a grand dinner at the Park the night but one before the wedding; and if I make no mention here of the contents of the red morocco case which he pressed into the hands of pretty, blushing Trix when she left, or of a certain envelope which Charley Dacres found next morning on his dressing-table, it is simply because the jolly Squire liked to do handsome things on the sly. The bride's diamonds became her grandly on the wedding-day, and Messrs. Cox and Greenwood took due note that Captain Dacres had deposited with them the purchase-money for his majority. So most people were pleased, except indeed Mr. Wray, who casually observed to one of his intimate friends, that he thought his father was making too much fuss about it all, as his cousin, the Captain,

might have looked higher than a country attorney's daughter.

At the Park all went merrily. There, no unwonted hospitalities had to be arranged, no painful parting was in store. There was assembled—so to speak—the audience. The actors were elsewhere, all but the bridegroom, and he is well understood to be a necessary, but quite a secondary actor in the nuptial drama. All went merrily until just as break-*was* over on *the* morning, when the ladies were thinking that it was high time to give the finishing touch to their toilettes before going to church, and the men, that a cigar on the lawn would not be a bad thing; a servant entered, and whispered something in Mr. Algernon's ear, which caused him to give an angry but (except to the servant) inaudible, reply. The heir-apparent of Guilderbury Park sauntered into the conservatory, and was in the act of lighting his cigar, when the same domestic approached him, with great reluctance, handing him a card on which something was written. Mr. Wray's first impulse was, evidently, to tear up the card, but his eye fell on the writing and he read it.

"Don't wait for me Charley," he said, ten minutes afterwards to the bridegroom, "here's a fellow come on business—confound it! and I must see him. I'll come over in

the dog-cart, and I dare say catch you up."

The church was distant some three hundred yards from the Priory, and there was a private path leading thereto through the shrubbery—the path through which our good-for-nothing made his way the morning he played that disgraceful practical joke on the Justices. As soon as it was announced that the Park carriages had arrived at the main entrance of the church, the bridal party started, and as soon as they had gained the altar steps the ceremony began. No one but Charley Dacres observed that his best man was missing. But what of that? A wedding without bridesmaids would be horrible, but the best man! who thinks of him? Has he a bouquet to hold, or a dress to arrange? No such luck. He has only to see that the happy man was, no doubt about that, looking as handsome, and as happy as even his poor little trembling Trix could wish him to look.

It was only when the register was signed in the vestry, and the witnesses were called to affix their names, that Sir Thomas turned about and said—

"Why, where's Algernon?"

Echo did not make the usual reply, because there was none in that confined apartment.

The Park party had too much to talk about I suppose, as they drove towards

Southerton to stare about them. Or if some did see a jaded horse and its rider passing slowly along one of the bridle paths, they paid no attention thereto. But if good Sir Thomas had encountered that horseman, and asked *him* "Why, where is Algernon?" he might have had an answer to his question.

He got it half-an-hour after Beatrix Bloxam had lost one of her names, and it was to the effect that Mr. Wray was very sorry, he had been seized with a sudden palpitation of the heart (he was liable to such seizures). It was nothing serious. He would be well enough perhaps to come to the breakfast. His father was on no account to tell anybody he was ill, and they were not to wait for him. This news came in a letter brought by a groom. Algernon was evidently ill, for his usually distinct handwriting was very shaky.

It was not the first time that Sir Thomas had heard of these "palpitations," which, however, had had no serious result, and so many cries of "wolf" had somewhat hardened him.

"What cocktails these young fellows are!" said he as he pocketed his son's epistle.

Amongst the wedding guests was the gentleman, aged six, for whom Jack Hill had made a boat which would swim, as narrated in an early portion of this story, and he—not being admitted into the vestry, because there

was no room for him—took to wandering about the church. To his juvenile mind, there was something infinitely refreshing in being permitted to run about a place where he had usually to maintain a monotonous propriety. He wandered into the organ loft. The organ, with its red curtains in front and unseen performer, had been a thing of mystery to him for a long time. He peered through those red curtains; and forthwith, just as the bride and bridegroom were emerging from the vestry, there rang out a shrill cry:

“Oh, Ma—come here—come here! Here’s Mr. Hill playing hide and seek. Oh I’ve got you, I’ve got you; oh, you great story! You *are* Mr. Hill—you know you are.”

The next moment there was a heavy step on the stair, the sound of a struggle and a fall, and when Mr. Bloxam and some others came upon the scene, they found that Stephen Grice had got Jack by the throat, under the benches, and that it was going hard with Jack.

They made the old man release his hold, and both rose dusty and breathless. Jack’s first word was to the lawyer.

“Look here, Mr. Bloxam,” he said, “believe me, I never thought to make this row. I thought no one would see me.”

“What business had you to come here at all?” asked Bloxam angrily.

"To prevent a scoundrel from standing by the side of your daughter's husband, sir," replied Jack. The excitement got the better of him, and drove out words which he had not intended to say—at least not then.

"Take him out—take him out, sir!" gasped Grice, "a church isn't the place for this sort of thing. Take him out. I'm an old man, but by God! if I put my hands on his throat again—"

"Hush, Grice, hush! For my sake, be quiet!" said Bloxam. "You have said something, Mr. Hill, which requires immediate explanation. What do you mean?"

Jack, driven fairly at bay, had nothing for it but to do as he did.

"Come, you and Grice, anywhere you please, and I'll tell you. Prosser, like a good fellow, take these people away. Surely, if I satisfy these two, they ought to be content! Have the ladies all gone out?"

Fortunately they had, and without knowing what was going on above; all but poor little Con, who had heard the cry "Here's Mr. Hill!"

Bloxam led the way into the shrubbery aforesaid, followed by Jack and the game-keeper, and there he halted.

"I promised to see you yesterday before you left London," began Jack, "but I was

not ready soon enough with what I required."

"You might have put off your visit, I think."

"And in the meantime, Mr. Algernon Wray would have been the honoured friend of your daughter's husband."

"Why should he not be?"

"Mr. Bloxam, why did you recall your invitation to me to be at this wedding?"

"Because I would have no one here that cannot look that man in the face, and say, 'Stephen Grice, I never wronged you or yours, and am worthy to press the hand of a good girl on her wedding-day.' That is why, Mr. Hill."

"Stephen Grice," replied Jack, "look at me. Nay, look up, man! I am told to look you in the face, and how can I do so if you turn from me like that? Stephen Grice, I solemnly declare before Heaven that I never wronged you or yours! Whether I am worthy or not to press the hand of Mr. Bloxam's daughter on her wedding-day, he can judge for himself when he has looked at this envelope and read this letter."

We know what he handed his old friend as he thus spoke. But he would not give him time to read the letter.

"Do, pray understand," he pleaded, "that I never intended to make this scene to-day! It never would have happened if it had not

been for that awful brat. I saw Mr. Wray, and told him he had better be ill, and not come to the wedding, and he took the hint. Was *he* worthy to press her hand? You know how fond I was of you all. I couldn't help coming to see Trix married—I couldn't, indeed; and I've spoilt the day for you, blundering fool as I am!"

"Say no more, Jack. Oh, Grice, read this! Jack, Jack, what can I to say to you?" said Bloxam, deeply moved.

"Let Grice speak first. If he—"

"Why, man, don't you see it all?" cried the lawyer, impatiently, as Grice stood fumbling with Van Wyan's letter. "Read, read. The key of the whole cursed mystery is in your hands! When did you get that envelope?" This to Jack.

"I picked it up in the Park the day of the cricket match, near where I met poor Maggy."

"You did speak to her, then?"

"Of course I did. Did I not thrash that fellow for her sake years ago? Why should I not speak to her?"

"And you wanted her sent away because—"

"Because I saw her in finery unsuited to her station, and knew that she got notes addressed 'my own Margôt,'" replied Jack, warmly.

"Lord, Lord, how we have twisted these things against you! Grice, have you done yet?"

"I—I'm so bewildered, sir. I—I don't know what to say," replied the poor old man.

"There, say nothing, Grice," Jack replied, "but if you believe what I have said, just give me your hand, and presently tell the folks about that Jack Hill don't pretend to be a saint, or anything like one; but that he's not quite the blackguard they've tried to make him out, and don't intend to be, if he can help it."

The hard, honest hand of the keeper closed on Jack's with a strength that made him wince, and just at that moment a white flash darted across the grass into the midst of the path where it stopped, and took the form of a young girl, who stood with eager and parted lips, both hands pressed tight upon her throbbing breast, as though there were something there which was trying to beat its way out towards the good-for-nothing. And when he turned and saw who was there, read what was in those eloquent eyes; there was no need for words to tell what had passed. He sprang forward and took her in his arms, the little hands fell to her side; and so it was, I suppose, that the prisoner so long pent-up in her heart escaped.

The "awful brat," whose unholy investigations had caused the riot in the church, ran away frightened, and with many sobs

and gasps recounted to the first person he met that Mr. Hill was there, fighting with a man. The first person he met was, of course, the last he should have told, being Constance—who rushed out into the shrubbery, not knowing what she did, or where she was going, only longing to be alone, anywhere, anywhere to try and think what was to be done. She had heard nothing of what had passed between Jack, Mr. Bloxam, and the gamekeeper; but when she saw the latter give Jack his hand, she—well, a properly conducted heroine would have acted differently, I admit. She would have gone quietly back to the house, pretended to know nothing, and have fretted for two or three years, perhaps for ever. But little Con loved Jack from the bottom of her innocent, impulsive heart; and as he would never have known that if he had not loved her as well, I do not think that any great harm was done. The reader has no right to complain of this abrupt dénouement at any rate, for the declarations of lovers, when faithfully recounted, are very hard reading.

Mr. Bloxam discreetly retired, and Grice, after the manner of his kind, made a plunge into the bushes, and disappeared.

The lawyer returned in about a quarter of an hour—discreetly also, and found Jack

alone. Little Con had retired to her room to wash away the traces of the only happy tears she had ever shed. He pressed Jack to come to the breakfast, urging that they owed him a public retractation of their unfounded charges. There would be no occasion to accuse any one else just then. Jack must come. But Jack refused plumply. There would be a fuss, and he hated fuss; besides, he was upset and bothered in mind, and "Look here," he said, as a concluding reason, "I am not fit to go amongst a lot of swells." And certainly, with one's collar torn half off, a knee burst through one's trousers, and one's coat covered with the deposit on a floor that is swept once a month, one cannot be said to be in wedding trim.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Bloxam, unable to decline his excuses.

"I shall wait at Prosser's till it's all over, and if, when the people are gone, I may come over for an hour—"

"Yes, yes, do come."

"I suppose you have guessed what passed here just now?" asked the good-for-nothing, rather sheepishly.

"We can talk about that another day," said Bloxam."

"I had an engagement in town, but I've got such a lot to say to her, and—and to you

all, I shall telegraph and say I can't come," Jack added, decisively.

"Shall you send the message to your landlady?"

"No, to a friend who lives in the same house."

"An intimate friend?"

"Very intimate. He would do anything for me, and I for him."

"Would take care of your rooms whilst you were away, and all that?" asked the lawyer.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, come into my office and write your telegram, and I will send it."

Jack went to the office, which, as we know, had an entrance distinct from the house, and wrote his message. He asked Beckwith to send some one to review for him a new play which was to come out that night at the Olympic, and said that he would be back without fail to-morrow. He gave the paper to his old friend, and went his way. The door had hardly closed on him, when Bloxam seized the pen, and with a broad grin on his jolly face, added these words:

"Pack up my dress clothes, and send them to Southerton Station, London and South Western line, by the 7.10 train from Charing Cross."

"I'll be hanged if he shan't dance with

that little girl to-night," said the lawyer, as he rang his bell. And he was not hanged.

Jack was mistaken in supposing he had spoilt the day. The scuffle in the church had been witnessed by only a few, and these Grice entreated to say nothing about it. The "awful brat" was gagged with an extra slice of wedding cake, and all that was known by the guests at the Priory was, that there had been some mistake about Mr. Hill, and he had set it right.

At "The Horn," the cronies each declared that *he* had never believed it. Master Jack wasn't that sort, he wasn't. It was some one else, for sure. But remembering the great error that had been made, no one was bold enough to hazard a surmise as to who that "some one else" might be. Spoilt the day! On the contrary. There was not a man, woman or child in the village, that did not enjoy himself or herself all the more for knowing that Master Jack was all right.

But what inconsiderate people lovers are. With the turmoil of a wedding just over, and the turmoil of a ball yet to come, Jack must needs visit the Priory at four o'clock; with his torn garments run up by Polly Primus, and most of the dust brushed from his coat by the same willing hands. Of course the Bloxams had all gone to their rooms to lie

down and rest awhile—all but the quiet bridesmaid who was compelled by her friend Alice to remain in the drawing-room.

“You’re a nasty hard-hearted little wretch,” said that young lady, as Constance came running to her, scared—as once before—by the apparition of a hat, (not a white one this time), “and if you don’t go down directly, I’ll go and tell him it was all a mistake, and you don’t care for him at all.”

So Constance was obliged to go down, and was found deeply interested in Mr. Tupper’s Proverbial Philosophy, as the owner of the hat came in.

“It seems so like a dream,” mused happy little Con. “How came you—so clever as you are—to love me?”

“Never you mind, darling. It growed, like Topsy; but now we are upon the subject, when did you begin to love me.”

“When you spoke so kindly of my father!”

“Why that was on the first day we met.”

“I always loved you, Jack,” she said looking down, and nervously clasping and unclasping her bracelet, “and I never needed your love more than now.”

And then she told him all.

“Only you must not be angry with poor mamma,” she said, when all was told, and Jack had risen and was striding up and down

the room with his teeth clenched. "She cannot help it. I see that now, dear Jack. It is almost like madness, and no one is responsible for that. You will not be angry with mamma—for my sake."

He stopped, looked deeply into the pleading eyes, and kissing the fair young anxious brow—repeated her words,

"For your sake, darling."

Beckwith obeyed that telegram, and Jack danced with that little girl at the ball, thereby saving Mr. Bloxam from a shameful end.

CHAPTER XIV.

LADY PLACEMORE RESIGNS HER SITUATION.

THE conduct of the big girl, called Martha, became unsatisfactory soon after her interview with Mr. Burridger in the lane. Hitherto she had been contented with her place, cheerful and attentive. The transition from a workhouse to the school in the Hendon lanes, seemed to her a step into Paradise from a place not to be named; but the tempter who leaned over the gate of the drying-field had given her to eat of the tree of knowledge, and like her mother Eve, she yearned after forbidden fruit. Gorgeous were the vistas which he opened to her eyes. She was to have a situation in London and twenty pounds a year; she was to be taken to the British Museum, the National Gallery and other highly exciting places of amusement; she was to have a silk gown and kid gloves to wear on Sundays—and all for nothing; that is, she was merely to keep Mr. Burridger informed of all her mistress did. If she received any letters and left them about, Mr.

Burridger would buy them. That was to be extra.

"You see, Martha," he said, "these people who have been coming here are trying to put upon her, and if it wasn't for you and I, she'd get into trouble. She'll thank us some day, Martha, for what we done."

"And when am I to go to Lunun?"

"As soon as ever I find out what I want to know, and you can make the time long or short just as you like, Martha," replied Mr. Burridger, with a knowing wink.

Days went by, and no one came to see the Matron. She wrote a few more letters than usual, but that was all. The big girl began to fear that she would have no opportunity of earning her promotion, and grew careless and discontented; earning thereby instead a good many scoldings, which did not improve her condition.

"Well, Martha," said the Matron, one day, "*I shall not report your conduct, because I am so very soon going to leave; I only advise you to alter your behaviour when my successor comes, for she may not be so lenient.*"

"You going to leave, mum!" cried the big girl in dismay.

"Yes, on the 15th of next month."

"Oh, what a shame!"

The Matron could not help smiling at this outburst.

"I am going, because I wish to go, Martha."

"It ain't because I've bin going on bad, is it, mum?" asked the big girl, with her apron up to her eye.

"If one of us left for that reason, I think it would be you," replied the Matron. "However, I am glad to see that you acknowledge your errors, and hope that you will be more careful for the future. Now, attend to me, Martha, I am thinking of going to London the day after to-morrow. May I depend upon you to take the greatest care of the children, and on no account to leave the house?"

"That you may, mum," Martha replied sturdily, "I wouldn't go out not even if a Punch and Judy was to come."

Later on in the afternoon, she informed her mistress that they were quite out of tapes, and asked leave to step down to the village and purchase a supply. Permission granted, the big girl slipped down; but not until she had scrawled a letter informing Mr. Burridger of what she had heard, which letter duly reached its destination.

The day on which the Matron was to meet Mr. Blisset in the broad walk of the Regent's Park, was of the sort which French writers

affect to believe that the Londoners live in perpetually, and in which London undoubtedly does indulge in the winter months. A day on which it tries to rain, and tries to fog, and tries to blow, and tries to shine; and doing none of the four, effectually leaves the heavens above and the earth below in a clammy, dim state, very depressing to the feelings.

From the Great Northern Railway Station to the Park is no great distance, and the matron, chilled after her railway journey, walked it briskly. The fog was denser on the Broad Walk than in the streets, and she had passed nearly to the Camden Town end before she met a soul. It was not a day to be walking in the Park for pleasure. She reached the end, and turned, when Blisset came upon her through the fog.

"Capital! capital!" he exclaimed looking at her black dress, and widow's weeds. "You have kept your promise, splendidly, Harriet."

"I have done everything that you told me," she replied.

"And I have not forgotten my part either. Did you walk here?"

"I did."

"Not tired, I hope?"

"I am a little. I walked fast, I feared to be late."

"You are punctuality itself. Well, we can sit down on one of the seats in the plantation; and be as undisturbed as though we were in St. Paul's."

"I cannot stay long. I have to see your late father's solicitor, Mr. Sams, and must return by the 5.50 train."

"To business then. Has your resignation been accepted?"

"It has. This is the secretary's letter."

"Good—that will keep. Have you heard from Sams?"

"Yes."

"And what does he say?"

"Very little indeed—merely that he will see me to-day."

"Be careful, be very careful, Harriet; remember what I told you about Champion. He is your sole and only authority for my being dead."

"You need not fear. Is there anything more to say? I am very cold here."

"I am sorry for that. Briefly then—the sum to which you are entitled is one thousand seven hundred and eight pounds, and in Consols, which with unclaimed dividends will come to about two thousand pounds. Tell Sams to have the stock transferred into your name, and keep it where it is. The heirlooms—which I daresay he has at his bankers,

consist of a set of diamonds and opals given to my grandmother on her wedding, by George III (she had been a maid of honour) a tiara of emeralds, very old fashioned, a gold presentation vase, and four or five race cups. Not worth much altogether, but you must claim them. It will look well to have them, you know. If Sams asks you how you are going to manage on the interest of your two thousand pounds, you can say that a distant relative has left you a small property abroad, on which you intend to live. I am already in treaty, through an agent, for a house and grounds at Dieppe, where I hope you will be happy. Nobody there need know how much you have in the funds, and how much elsewhere; and Sams won't inquire as to what style you live in. The balance up to a thousand a year, which I shall pay you, will come through a banker at Paris. How does all this suit you?"

"As well as anything could, under circumstances; but must I go abroad?"

"For the present, I think you must; Lord Hilton has been making so much fuss about me that people would be asking awkward questions about my widow's means."

"Be it so," she said, rising. "How am I to let you know the result of my interview with Mr. Sams?"

"Write to me, addressed X.Y., post office, Devereux Court, Temple."

"You will not confide your present name or calling to me?"

"My dear girl, it would only embarrass you. The less you know, the less you will have to conceal. Write as I say, and I will give you fresh instructions, if requisite, by return of post; I suppose you have only one delivery a day?"

"That is all, the letters come in about noon."

"Very well; if you write when you get home to-night I shall get your letter some time on Thursday, and you will have my answer on the following day. It is perhaps best that I should not walk with you to the gates, so for the present good-bye, and again thank you, Harriet."

So she went her way to the north, and he to the west; and Mr. Robert Burridger, who had followed her from the station, and overheard (hid by the fog and the bushes) every word they had said, emerged from his lair, sat himself on the seat they had vacated, and made notes in his pocket-book.

"X.Y. at the Post-office," he mused. "I could easily get that, only if I did, he couldn't answer it, and the answer is the thing for me, Mr. Yates *alias* Blisset, *alias* Sir Augustus

de Barkham Placemore ! Good Lord ! what a chance ! Prosecute me for obtaining money under false pretences, will you my Lord Earl Hilton ? Cut me in the street again will you, my fine returned convict ? Oh, what a game ! what a game !”

And the little man clasped his pocket-book, and stamped and danced about with evil glee.

A happy thought struck him in the midst of these evolutions, and he darted off towards the railway station, only stopping on his way at a sham jeweller's shop, where he purchased the largest (mock) cameo brooch in stock ; a pair of ear-rings, ornamented apparently with red sealing-wax, and ticketed “ Real coral, seven and sixpence the pair,” and a waist-belt buckle, two inches by three, of pure and solid gold, price half-a-crown.

Mr. Sams, like a sensible man, would not commit himself to anything in answering Lady Placemore's note ; but lost no time in making the necessary inquiries. He saw Champion, and was referred by him to the solicitor for the capitalist who had advanced Lord Hilton the five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and in whose hands the proof of Placemore's death, and of the identity of Miss French, the matron, with his widow, had been placed. As they were conclusive

enough to satisfy him, Mr. Sams, who had no interest one way or the other, had very little to say to the widow, save to take her instructions. She would have to go with him to Doctors' Commons, and take out administration to her husband's estate, and there would be a power of attorney to transfer the stock, and some other papers to sign. She would probably make it convenient to call again in about ten days.

She left the office, grateful that no questions had been asked, and the thing seemed so straightforward and simple, that she almost convinced herself that there was no harm in it.

"Is all well, Martha?" she asked as she entered the farm-house in the Hendon lanes.

"Oh, yes, mum, and I've give your room such a-cleaning up. I ain't bin off my legs all day."

"Anybody called?"

"Mr. Johnson, mum; but I wouldn't let him in."

"You might have admitted him, Martha."
(Mr. Johnson was the rector of the parish.)

"I give him your orders, mum, and he said I was a good girl, and he would call to-morrow."

"I saw that Mr. Burridger at the London station, Martha," said the Matron, looking

the big girl in the face, "whilst I was waiting for the train to come back."

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed the big girl. "He hadn't the cheek to speak to you though had he, mum?"

"I thought perhaps he had been here again," pursued the matron still keeping her eyes on the big girl's face.

"P'raps he come, he's brass enough to do it. P'raps the Lord Mayor come, *I* don't know. Not a soul but old Jim and Mr. Johnson has opened the garden-gate this day since you shut it." And the big girl told the truth, but not quite all of it. How could the matron deem it necessary to ask if any one had been in the lane?

She sat up that night again later than usual, writing her husband an account of what had passed at Mr. Sams' office; and the big girl lay awake thinking of a splendid broach, a queenly pair of coral ear-rings, and a gorgeous buckle, which might be hers in a few days, if she could only get Mr. Burridger a letter which the people who were "putting upon" her poor mistress were going to send.

* * * *

"Have you got a letter addressed X.Y., Hendon post-mark?" asked Mr. Burridger of the keeper of the little post-office near the Temple gate.

The man looked through the letters "to be called for," and replied in the negative.

"That's a bore," replied Bob, "for I can't call again to-day. It's of great importance that letter. Mind you don't give it to anybody but the right owner."

"How should I know who's the right owner?" replied the man sulkily. "I shall give it to whoever calls for it, and describes it."

"Give it to a tall gentleman, close shaved, in a foreign sort of hat, and a crystal locket hanging to his watch chain, and you're all right. Give it to anyone else, and there'll be trouble, and so I tell you," said Bob in a decisive tone, leaving the shop.

"They'll know him again after that," mused Bob, as he went his way towards his friend and nominal master, Mr. Isaacs' office. He was right, the man at the post office looked well at the claimant for X. Y.'s letter, and did know him again when the time came to ask him the question.

Mr. Isaacs' connection with his present articulated clerk had endured for some years to their mutual benefit. It had been his business to hold the terrors of the law over the heads of those miserables to whom Mr. Burridger had lent money, and Mr. Burridger had his percentage out of the fees thus gained; on condition that no misplaced le-

niency on his part should be allowed to divert the six-and-eightpences from their legitimate destination. Mr. Isaacs had a good deal of business of this description, from which it may be decided that he was not an ornament to his profession. Hard, grasping, unscrupulous as he was, he had his match in the artful clerk, who was actually his partner, and was to appear as such to the world, as soon as the Law Society would give him his certificate.

The business which occupied these worthies on the return of Mr. Burridger from the post-office, was a bill of exchange which had been sent up from Portsmouth by a co-religionist of Mr. Isaacs, and bore the signature of Frederick Willerton.

"The money's safe enough, Sol," observed Bob. "Barnett must renew."

"He says he will—for a consideration."

"What does he want?"

"Twenty pound down, and a new bill at three months for four hundred; the young gent to take two gold watches for sixty."

"Rather stiff, eh, Sol?"

"Not stiffer than you've put it on, many a time, old boy," returned his partner.

"Look here, Sol," said Bob, sinking his voice and leaning over the table towards the speaker. "This young swell can help us, and

Barney can't expect to have it all his own way."

"How can he help us?"

"Do you mind that writ we have out against George Conway?"

"Bates *v.* Conway and wife, for slander and false imprisonment?"

"Ex-actly! Well, it won't do to make it a condition, of course; but if you ask him whilst you are talking about renewing the bill, where Mr. Conway is, and say you would be very much obliged to anyone who would tell you, and then turn the subject, and give him to understand that the bill can't be renewed anyhow. Why—don't you see?"

"Does he know anything about him?" asked Mr. Isaacs.

"His mother is Mrs. Conway's particular friend. He can find out, Sol."

"Ah, but would he tell?"

"Lord love you! He'd tell anything to get time, or a fifty pound note. These sort of swells will do anything when they're hard up. When he comes, you tell him the old story. That the bill *must* be met, but—but it's no good my telling you what to say. *You* know well enough, Sol."

Preachers may say what they please from the pulpit against filthy lucre, and filthy lucre getting—it is their "bis," as dear Artemus would have said. I—dealing out

only lay sermons, and having no bishop to wig me, make bold to say, "My young friends, this same filthy lucre is a good thing. It is a good thing to work for it, and to prize it when it is earned—always provided that it is earned honestly, and that other things, as good, are not lost sight of. Dross! Is it to call that 'dross' with which you can preserve thousands from misery? 'Filthy lucre!' Is it well to call that 'filthy,' which will, and can, keep the hands and the heart clean? Take the evils which money has wrought, and weigh them against the crimes, the lies, the petty subterfuges, and manœuvres leading up to fraud and the hulks, which the *want* of it has created; and which scale, think you, will kick the beam? I speak not of what ought to be, but of what *is*. Take the case—within the four corners of these pages—of Frederick Willerton. Do you think that if that young man had been accustomed to the moderate use of money, we should find him at the age of twenty pawning his mother's presents, cheating his father through the medium of rascally Army tailors, and giving bills to Jews which he had not the remotest prospect of being able to meet? This was the fault of his bringing up. Granted. Only want of money—money which he might have had, made him the liar

and the sneak we find him. I am not going to shirk Bob Burridger. Had he been born a Duke, he would have still been a skin-flint. He worked hard for money, and made a bad use of it. Well, people have made bad use of prayer-books before now; and are we to call them ugly names, and forget the good purposes to which they have been put? Take a life-belt and tie it to your heels, and it drowns you. Think well, then, of money, my young friends. Fasten it, not too closely, to your hearts, and it will carry you over many a wave, clear of sunken rocks, and hungry polypi, that wave their arms in the depths, longing to suck you down. Above all, it will keep you out of the clutches of the arch-demon—DEBT. Get money, my son, honestly, if you can: and there I stop.”

Mr. Robert Burridger had experience of how far hard-upishness could drive young swells, and old toilers too, for that matter, and his suggestions to his partner were not fruitless.

* * * *

“Now, Teddy,” said the matron of the nursery in the Hendon lanes, taking a chubby-faced urchin of five on her lap, and looking serious. “I’m not angry with you, Teddy, but you must tell the truth. Where is that letter?”

"Teddy don't know, mammy." All the children called her mammy.

"It was on the table, Teddy, when I went out with Mr. Johnson to the dormitory, and you stayed in the room."

"Oh, no I didn't, mammy. Mr. Johnson had an apple in his pocket. Martha told me he had."

"And so you followed him?"

"Es; and he did give it to little Susan," said Teddy, in a tone of deep reproach.

"Go and tell Martha I want her."

The big girl came, drying her red arms in her apron.

"You must help me to find a letter I was reading when Mr. Johnson came in, Martha. Look about well, everywhere."

"I'll be bound that mischieffull Teddy's bin and took it to make a boat of. He's always a-making paper boats," said Martha, turning over the things on the table. "He's more trouble than all the rest put together!"

"Teddy says he ran out after Mr. Johnson, because you told him he had an apple."

"So I did, mum. You sed yourself as he wasn't to be left alone in your room, upsetting the ink, and he did once afore."

"Did you see my letter when you came in?" asked the Matron, still searching about for it.

"Who says I came in?" demanded the big girl, turning a little pale.

"You said just now that Teddy was here, and that you told him—"

"Where was I, Teddy, when I told you Mr. Johnson had an apple?" she interrupted.

"Ou halloed out from the wash'us," replied Teddy stoutly.

"*There!* I've work enough of my own, surely, without bothering after other people's letters," observed the big girl sulkily, "and if I don't get these things wrung out afore night—"

"Well, go on with your work," said the matron, "*I* may have put the letter in my desk—I—I dare say I shall find it." A suspicion crossed her mind that she was making too much of her loss, and that it would not be well to let the big girl become too curious about it.

Inquiries discreetly made amongst the children, elicited the important fact that master Teddy had been seen with a paper boat that afternoon, and being asked how he had obtained the materials, replied that he had picked them up on the stairs. "What was the paper like?" "Oh, it was like a bit of paper." "Had it writing on it?" "Yes it had." "Was the writing written like this?" (showing a letter). "Yes, Mammy." "Or

printed like this?" (showing a piece of torn newspaper). "Yes Mammy." Whereupon Teddy began to blubber under his cross-examination, and could not be brought to say what he had done with his boat, but promised to make mammy another if she liked, by way of amends.

"God grant that it was that letter that the child found, and that it is destroyed," mused the Matron, sinking wearily into her chair. "It was awfully compromising—awfully!"

Two days afterwards, the big girl rushed into her mistress's room, without waiting this time to dry her arms, and requested her to come out into the yard "directly minute." The Matron thinking that one of the children had met with an accident, ran out after her maid, but only saw an upturned washing-tub, and a great mess of spilled water.

"What is the matter, Martha? Who made this mess?" she asked lifting her skirts. The train of Lady Placemore's mourning robe was less convenient in such places than the humble skirt of the quondam Miss French.

In reply, the big girl tilted up the tub, and pointing to a drabbled sheet of paper which lay in the wet beneath, asked triumphantly: "Is that there your letter, mum?"

Unmindful of her black crape, the Matron

was in the act of going down on her knees to seize it, but remembered herself in time.

"How came it there, Martha?"

"Why just as I sed, mum, to be sure. That there Teddy, he got it for a boat, and swimm'd it in this tub, which I put to ketch the rain water to wash with, and what does Jim do but come and rinse his raddishes in it, and mucks it so dreadful dirty that I had to turn it all out; and when I turns over the tub I sees someut white, and I sez to myself, I sez, that's Teddy boat, drat him! and I seed it was a letter, and knowed what a fuss you'd bin making, and I sez to myself, I sez, she shall see it just as it is; and oh, Lord! to think that a poor girl's character might be took away for such a thing!"

"I did not accuse you of taking it, Martha; please to pick it up," said the Matron. "Yes, it is the letter I missed. It is of no importance you see." As she spoke she tore it up into very small pieces, threw them back into the wet and returned to her room, telling the big girl as she passed in, that she had better get a broom and sweep that mess away, or the children would be sure to come and dabble in it.

So poor little Teddy was the culprit after all? Well, there was strong circumstantial evidence against him, certainly, and I dare

say that many a brat has been whipped on far slighter proof. Teddy was not whipped, on the contrary, the Matron dropped the subject, and Martha gave him sugared bread and butter, on the sly, for tea. Martha was in a very good temper singing over her work, a thing she had not done for some time, and occasionally feeling her pocket to see if it were really true that there was a box there containing the treasures after which she yearned. How then did she gain them, if Teddy's boat were really made of Abel Blisset's letter? Ah, *if*? A little consideration would have told the Matron that Teddy could not reach up to that tub so as to swim a boat in it, and that that ships constructed of the materials he employed have this great advantage over more solid structures—*they don't sink*. A closer inspection of the letter she saw in the wet would not have helped her. The writer himself could hardly have found out the deception, had he seen it before Martha put it into the tub, so exactly had Mr. Burridger imitated his style. Wet and bleared as it was when it came into the Matron's hands, the chances of detection were reduced to zero. How the astute Bob chuckled as he instructed the big girl to profit by the suspicion which had fallen on poor Teddy? How could he know the relative

altitudes of that juvenile and the water-tub ?

His object was to have a fac-simile—not to say a forgery—of the letter restored in such a manner, that the Matron should suppose it had never left the house, and this because it did not suit his purpose to frighten his quarry ; the bullet which was to bring him down not being yet cast. The letter was, indeed, awfully compromising, and, taken together with such explanation of its contents as the Matron could give, would have been enough to send Augustus de Barkham Placemore back to the hulks. Only wives are not allowed to give evidence for or against their husbands, and so Bob had to keep things quiet until he had made sure of his *coup*. Judging others by his own standard, he came to the conclusion that Blisset, Champion and Lord Hilton were in league, and had made an innocent accomplice of Lady Placemore. And truly there were grounds for suspicion, to one who did not know all the circumstances, or warped his mind to take one view of them. To Bob they ranged themselves in this wise. No sooner is Placemore identified with Yates the forger, than he comes forward himself—under a false name—and concocts a cock-and-a-bull story about his having died at Panama, and no sooner does Lord Hilton obtain the loan

about which so much fuss was made, than Mr. Blisset appears as a rich man, and the Matron gives up her situation. Thus the conspiracy became developed by Mr. Burridger to his great satisfaction. He hated Blisset for having made a tool of him. He hated Lord Hilton, curiously enough, more for the affront paid to his dearly loved manuscript report, than for the insulting letter we know of, and could bleed him. He hated Champion for the haughty manner in which the lawyer had always kept him at arm's length, and for getting the better of him respecting the Matron, and he could bleed him. The idea of doing society a service by exposing a swindle, and relegating an escaped scoundrel to the punishment he had so well deserved, did not occur to Mr. Robert Burridger. That was no business of his.

Having made up his mind that there was a conspiracy, the conviction that the conspirators were acting with due caution and secrecy followed as a matter of course; and Champion being one of them, and it being certain that he had visited, and been in correspondence with Lady Placemore, there was no occasion for further inquiry as to how *she* had been gained over. But then the check-marked with the letter L, which Martha had found in the grate! Whose was that?

This bothered Bob ; for being so exceedingly cunning and far-sighted, he could not see—like some other cunning and far-sighted people—what was under his nose. Blisset, of course, would never have dared to see his injured wife, thought Bob.

At last he came to the conclusion that it must belong to Lord Hilton, and that that nobleman had paid a secret visit to the Matron in furtherance of the conspiracy aforesaid. His dealings with the Earl had not given him a high idea of his sagacity, or powers of reticence, and after much consideration, he resolved to offer him the thing as his property, and to see if he could not get some admission thereby which might help his plans for the future. As I said before, the chek-mek bothered him, and he is not the first cunning person who has allowed an unexplained trifle to draw him from the right scent into trouble.

So, knowing that it was no use writing to the Earl, he managed to waylay him coming out of the office of the Ecuadorian Irrigation and Agricultural Company (Limited), and boldly handed him the chek-mek with a wink, which he intended should convey unutterable things.

Lord Hilton happened to be in an unusually good humour, for everything was going

well with the Company, and its shares were mounting like so many balloons; besides, he liked the deference which was always paid to him at the Board.

It is said that amidst his greatest triumphs in the legitimate drama, great John Kemble cherished recollections of his feats as harlequin at country fairs, and that Liston yearned to be allowed to play King Lear. In like manner, the Earl dearly loved to be thought a "good man of business"—I suppose, because "business" was the last thing he was fit for. So he could even tolerate Mr. Burridger as he came out from attending the Board, called him his "good fellow," and said that no, he did not want to buy it (the proffered chek-mek), as he stepped into his carriage.

Imagine Bob's feelings at being supposed to have degenerated into a street vendor of curious articles!

"It ain't for sale, my lord. I picked it up where you was the other day—don't you know? Hendon way," he explained through the carriage window.

"Hendon! Why, I have not been near Hendon for years," the Earl replied. "It's not mine, it's not mine, my man; but let me see—I have seen it before somewhere. L? Whose name begins with L that I know?" chattered the Earl. "Well, it is

not mine. You had better advertise it. Home, coachman."

The carriage went on with a jerk, and the hind wheel caught Bob's knee, and sent him sprawling in the mud.

His first vexation passed, he considered that, after all, he had not done badly. The thing must belong to Champion, though it was marked with the letter L. Lawyers have all sorts of things given, or left to them. Still, the chek-mek bothered him. It was destined to more than "bother him" hereafter.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. BURRIDGER PASSES THE EVENING ALONE.

THE Earl of Hilton did not take Jack's refusal of his offer in good part. "I could have made his fortune, by gad, sir," he observed one day to Blisset, now permanently appointed oracle in chief, "and he goes like a young fool and engages himself to be married! Nice little girl though, I must admit, but comes of a queerish stock. You've heard of George Conway of course?"

Mr. Blisset had not heard of the person in question. "Awfully loose fish," the Earl pursued, "goes about in his yacht with a perfect harem on board. Daren't show his face in England. Mother queer too. Not altogether right here it seems to me," and the speaker tapped his forehead significantly.

Mr. Blisset merely replied "Indeed!" and the subject dropped. He had become very silent and reserved of late. In certain positions, people who are silent and reserved win credit for much wisdom; and in the city, credit is everything. In the city a sprightly

demeanour is apt to give the idea of an empty pocket, and the same amount of heaviness which prevents the re-engagement of a clerk, is thought to add greatly to the respectability of a banker. Abel Blisset dressed and looked his part to perfection, the only thing not strictly business-like about him, being that crystal locket—a handsome, but somewhat effeminate ornament—which Bob Burridger had mentioned in his description of the owner of the X. Y. letter, and which he now wore hanging from his plain but massive watch-chain. Seated one day by pretty spoilt Milly—who was becoming more reconciled to him—as to whose portrait it contained, he explained that it contained no such thing, but would hold a few drops of otto of roses, or anything else that one liked to put in it. “A present,” he said, carelessly flicking it back into its place, “or I should not wear it.”

“By the by, Blisset,” asked the Earl when the latter’s dry “indeed!” had brought the conversation about George Conway to an end, “when *are* you coming down with me to Hilton. Hang it, man, leave business alone for a day or two and take a holiday.”

“I purpose doing so, and I dare say you’ll laugh when I tell you what for,” was his reply.

“Well, I certainly should like to have a laugh at you, you have become so serious lately.”

"I am going to escort Lady Placemore to Paris."

"Whew—w!" whistled the Earl, "you're there, are you? confound these widows; Sam Weller was right."

"The elder Mr. Weller's warning," replied Blisset, quietly correcting him as to the authorship of that famous piece of advice, "is not required in my case. I take an interest in the poor lady, and you know why."

"You are a right good fellow, Blisset," said the peer with warmth. "She wouldn't accept anything from me, and yet, as my friend, you deem it your duty to be civil to her, poor thing."

"She is not so 'poor' in any respect," Blisset replied; "only to follow the idea which appeared to pass through your mind just now, I think I may say that should I have ever had such views, I may raise my eyes higher than to the widow of Augustus Placemore." He looked the Earl searchingly in the face as he spoke, and no reply coming at the moment, continued—

"If matters go on as they promise, I shall very soon be a rich man. I come of a good old family, Lord Hilton, and worse matches have been made in the peerage of England than that which I could offer."

The Earl winced just a little. He did not

like to hear a Commoner talking so glibly of marriage in the order into which he had just entered. New comers are wont to be proud, you know ; and on the other hand, the shameful conduct of that "sad" young Marquis of Winthorpe, respecting which the great world—it being the dead season—had not done talking, prevented him from mounting the high horse. If Blisset had said, right out, "I am good enough to marry your daughter Milly," perhaps the Earl would have combatted his presumption ; but put in a general way, that Mr. Blisset might hope, if all went well, to marry into the peerage, there was nothing to be said.

Adversity had proved to Mr. Blisset that it was well to be prepared against all sort of dangers. And Heaven knows he had dangers enough to provide against. Hence his making Lord Hilton aware that he was about to escort Lady Placemore abroad. The more he could implicate such reputable persons as Lord Hilton and Mr. Champion in the affair, the more it would be believed that the affair was all straight-forward and right.

But Milly ! Why this hankering after Milly ? Had he not frankly admitted to his wife that he had entertained matrimonial schemes, and that there was, of course, an end to them ? There is nothing so deceptive

as frankness—such frankness I mean as that of this man with his wife. He had calculated beforehand the effect of every word he spoke to her. There was no real frankness in it. He told her what he felt he must tell, to gain his end, and his whole demeanour was, like his present life, a lie. He had never given up the hope of making Lady Amelia Aylwarde his wife. There were moments as he roamed through those dark Hendon lanes, when thoughts passed across his mind which need not be mentioned here. Enough to say that he would have stopped at no crime to gain her. He loved her, not as good women like to be loved, but in a manner which has sometimes won good women. Poor pretty Milly could not help feeling humbled by the slight which had been put upon her, and like many a wiser girl, thought—or had it silently in her heart without thinking—that she should like to be revenged on the false one, by showing him that she was far from inconsolable. The serpent eyes, which she had held in such dread, had not lost their power, only, somehow, they had lost their repulsiveness. Their owner seemed so unconscious of the effect they produced, and was so exceedingly attentive and deferential. Papa and Mary were right. She had been behaving very rudely to him. She had been silly, too, in

fearing him. Why, her slightest whim was his law. She could twist him round her finger if she pleased.

When there are only one pair of eyes in the world whose light you cherish, my dear young lady, you do not like to find another fixed on you ; but when *the* pair shine for some one else, it is different—provided, of course, that you are of the Milly Aylwarde stamp, which I hope you are not. Milly Aylwarde began to ask herself why she had taken a dislike to Abel Blisset, and the hour in which that question came was a bad one for Milly.

I have said that Blisset loved her with a love such as good women do not prize, and we men who go into law courts and read newspapers, and know what is going on around us, understand what that means. Such of us who—for their sins, I suppose—are condemned to write novels, are told that the fancied consequences of such a passion are unnatural, impossible, and so forth ; and it is of no use for us to point to the real results as prosaically recounted before the coroner and his honour the Judge of the Divorce Court. What a lying proverb is that which says that “truth is stranger than fiction !” Bankers never do commit forgery out of sensation romances, and Sir John Dean Paul

never did work at Portland. Husbands never do poison their wives out of novels, and that affair of Dr. Smethurst was a myth. People do not go and shoot each other in broad mid-day about women, and the Northumberland Street tragedy was a penny-a-liner's hoax. We who write these sort of books, take human nature as we think we find it, taking our models out of those confounded newspaper reports, and supposing that what people tell my lords the Queen's Justices on their oaths, and on the strength of which men and women are hanged and transported, may, after all, be true—and we have our reward. You think it improbable that one like Abel Blisset should hope to be able to deceive a jealous wife. I do not ask you to put yourself in his place; I simply ask you to remember what foolishness such men have attempted, and to bear in mind always that he loved pretty Milly with that sort of love for which better men than he have gone to the gallows.

After all, the risks which he was prepared to run were not so great. If it were proclaimed throughout Dieppe that Mr. Abel Blisset was about to lead to the hymeneal altar the lovely and accomplished daughter of the Earl of Hilton (that is the correct way of putting it, I think) what would that matter

to Lady Placemore? Who was Mr. Abel Blisset to her? She should never have the chance of coming back to England and finding out who the happy bridegroom was—that he could and would make sure. If by any accident he were found out, why then he might just as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. He balanced these calculations quite calmly in his mind, toying the while with the crystal ball, which was not a locket, as was his wont, whilst engaged in such thoughts.

He escorted Lady Placemore to the French watering-place, and assisted to settle her in the pretty suburban residence which she had inherited. The poor purchaser! He had scarcely completed his bargain ten days before he passed away. He had never even seen his property. Such is the uncertainty of life!

It was all the same to the good folks of Dieppe. One tenant was as good to them as another. The English Milady was charming, and when that word is pronounced by a Frenchman, there is nothing further to be said.

“Dull!” exclaimed Mr. Blisset, in reply to an observation of the ex-matron on the morning of the day fixed for his return to London, “not a bit of it. Pay ready money for everything. Subscribe to a charity or two, make friends with the English parson, and

hold yourself aloof from the first people who call on you, and you'll have the place at your feet in a month. Be dull here? oh, no!"

"Would it not be well if I were to engage a—if I were to get some lady to come and live with me?" she asked.

"Do just as you please, my dear Harriet; only of course it must be a stranger."

"When we part to-day, Augustus," she resumed after a long pause, "we part for ever."

"I am afraid it must be so."

"I know it must. Left entirely to myself, the feeling that I am an impostor—please do not interrupt, there is no other word—the feeling that I am an impostor may wear off, and I may be able to look such friends as I may gain in the face. This could never be so with you constantly before me, either in person or by correspondence."

"You are speaking like a highly sensible woman. Oh, Harriet, if we could only begin the world again."

"If I could do so, I should spare myself one grievous mistake."

"That of marrying me, I suppose?"

"That of loving a man whom I could not esteem," she replied quietly. "In the years which followed our separation, I tried to educate myself a little, and see things now as

I ought to have seen them long ago."

"You know how I hate preaching, Harriet."

"I have nearly done. What I have to add should not offend you. I merely wish to say that I am not now surprised at your past conduct—that I blame myself for much that I have said and done—that I do not blame you as once I did. I was no fit companion for you."

The expression which passed over his face as she thus spoke, brought the blood rushing into her own, and she added quickly, "I say this simply in self-defence. Had I felt then as I feel now, I would never have lived a second month under the same roof with you."

"And yet you do not blame me as much as you did," he sneered.

"I am afraid I cannot explain the apparent contradiction; I am speaking, as it were, of two people—the vain, thoughtless, but loving girl who married you, and the woman who sees all her faults and follies. As both, I know you to be selfish and false-hearted, but I cannot help thinking now that I might have done more to change your nature and keep you true. I might not have succeeded, but I wish I had tried. Now do you understand me?"

"It is rather late in the day to try," he

replied. "We both made a mistake, and have had to suffer for it. Let it rest thus."

"I have said my last word on the subject."

"I am very glad to hear it," he replied, "you began like a sensible woman, Harriet, and you ended like a —, well never mind. As we are to part for ever, as you say, don't let us waste the few moments which remain, in talking of things that are done and cannot be undone. Is there anything further that I can do for you?"

"Nothing."

"You understand exactly how you are to draw your money?"

"Exactly."

"And you agree with me, that it is best that you should continue to live abroad?"

"I have quite made up my mind to do so."

"Then good bye, Harriet."

"Good bye."

"I might have made something of that woman, or she of me, if we had gone the right way to work," mused Blisset, as he drove down to the Steam Boat Quay, "only we didn't, and so there is no use thinking of it now."

* * * *

By this time the Ecuadorian Irrigation and Agricultural Company (Limited) had reached the position long ago predicted for it. "There

is nothing that succeeds like success," and the success of its promoter was undeniable. He ceased to be its secretary, and took his seat at the Board as managing director. He took his seat at other Boards as well, and became a power in the city—an oracle at the West End. Now it was that being able to pay people to take all the trouble off his hands, he changed his attic in the Adelphi for chambers in St. James' Street. His friend, Lord Hilton—who took a childish delight in spending money—furnished them for him, and little fault could be found with his Lordship's selections. Mr. Blisset's surroundings were complete at last. He joined two new clubs, and had his name on the books of several old ones. He had his mail phaeton, his saddle horses and his brougham. The little dinners he gave on Saturday nights were the talk of the town. Old epicures watered at the mouth as they spoke of them. It became "the thing" to know Mr. Blisset.

He accompanied Earl Hilton to his ancestral seat, and was charmed with the vast improvements which had been made; and when Sir George invited the Earl to a grand battue in the preserves, which next year would be his own, Mr. Blisset made one of the party.

During a pause in the sport soon after luncheon, the Earl took out a cheroot, and called

to his guest—who happened to be stationed in an angle of the plantation near him—for a light; which, however, he had not to give.

“Hang it, man, have you not got a fusee, or anything? Where’s that machine you had in the Isle of Wight?”

“I am sorry to say I have lost it.”

“What a nuisance! By the way, I was offered just such another in the street some time ago.”

“Oh, those catch penny things they sell in the street are good-for-nothing.”

“The one I saw was just as good as yours. I daresay the fellow stole it. He had only one, and it was engraved with an L.”

“An L! in a double diamond?” asked Blisset.

“Something of that sort, and now I think of it, it was that little scoundrel, Burridger, who offered it for sale. Holloa! *Mark!* Well missed, egad!”

“One cannot talk and shoot too, my lord,” said Blisset, slipping two new cartridges into his breech-loader, and watching the pheasant as it became a speck in the distance.

“I wish you had told me about my chek-mek, before,” he said, as they drove home together after the *battue*, “there is a story connected with it, and I would not lose it for ten times its value.”

"My dear fellow, I forgot all about it till just now ; besides, how was I to know, or you either, that it was yours."

"It was engraved with an L in a double diamond."

"With an L, certainly, but I did not notice the diamond."

"Did you notice if the box had been split?"

"Well, now you mention it, I think it had been."

"That chek-mek once saved a man's life. In one of the numerous revolutions that we had in Peru, a ball struck him full on the breast, but glanced off that little box. Afterwards he considered it as a talisman."

"What nonsense ! A dollar or a button might have done the same. What do you want with talismans ?"

"To me it is the parting gift of the best friend I ever had," Blisset replied, "and I don't mind owning that I think I was unlucky to lose it."

"You believe in luck ?"

"My dear lord," Blisset laughed, "am I not the very impersonation of it ?"

"I shall have to run up to town for a day or two," Blisset observed next morning, after he had read his letters, "I wish to goodness there were no such thing as the post when one is taking a holiday."

"Pshaw, man!" said the Earl, "let the post undo what it does. Write your answers. You'll never have a peaceful moment, Blisset, if you allow people to think that you are at their beck and call for every trifle. You are so awfully active."

"On the contrary, there is not a lazier mortal in the world than I am."

"And yet some stupid letter sends you tearing about in railway trains in such weather as this, when you might be at your ease in what I suppose is not an uncomfortable house?"

"There is a method in my laziness," he replied, lighting a cigar. "I am going to make myself uncomfortable for two days, in order that I may be able to inflict myself for a week longer than I at first proposed in the most perfect house it was ever my good fortune to be welcomed in."

Lord Hilton was pleased at the compliment.

"Surely, you're not going about that trumpery you call a 'talisman,'" he said, quickly, as the thought passed across his mind.

"No; but I tell you candidly that I am not sorry to find an opportunity of looking after it."

"Well, I never would have supposed that you were superstitious."

"One cannot be perfect," Blisset replied, with a shrug.

"How long is it since you lost it?"

"I cannot say. I scarcely ever used it except when travelling. I do not remember having seen it for some months."

"And how long have you had it?"

"Some six or eight years."

"See now what a man it is!" said the Earl, throwing himself back in his chair, with the air of one who is about to laugh a matter out of court. "He keeps a thing for six or eight years, during which luck is dead against him. He calls it a 'talisman,' but takes so much care of it, that he cannot say when he missed it. He loses it, makes his fortune, and then goes fussing up to town in the snow to find it! Why, if there be any luck about the thing, it's bad luck. Let it alone, man, let it alone!"

"I never called it a talisman, my lord," replied Blisset, quietly; "it was yourself who gave it that name; and I have said that I am not going to town on its account."

"Well, it's no use arguing with a man who has made up his mind. When do you go?"

"By the 5.50, and shall return on Friday."

"Talisman and all?"

"You must have your joke. Yes—I hope talisman and all. My dear lord," he added,

with a burst of heartiness, unusual to him in that company, "would *you* like to know that the gift of a dear dead friend was in the hands of a little scoundrel like that Burridger? If you gave me a ring or a seal, or what not, as a token of the friendship with which I am honoured, and I were to lose it, and knowing how I might regain the gift, were to take no trouble about it—what would you think of me?"

This sort of argument is difficult to answer.

"In business he is as cold and as stern as a rock," said Lord Hilton, to his daughters, when their guest had taken his departure, "but in other matters he is just a warm-hearted, impulsive child."

"I wonder if his crystal ball is a talisman, too?" laughed pretty Milly. "I'll tease him about it when he comes back."

* * * *

The house in Buckingham Street in which Mr. Isaacs, attorney-at-law, carried on his business, was his property—at least, he had a long lease of it, and made it pay by letting the second or third floors as offices. The third floor fell vacant soon after Mr. Burridger had commenced his (nominal) noviciate, and into it he moved his household gods. The lodging-house in Maddox Street did not pay, and Bob's filial affection cooled

before demands for small loans to avert the water-rates, the landlord, and other necessary evils.

"You see, old chap," said Bob, to his partner, "if I stop there, she'll make a regular milch cow of me, whereas, if I come and live here, and she wants something, she must take it in the way of business. With her blubbering in the kitchen, and the man in the hall, swearing he has called six times, and won't go away without his money—what is a fellow to do?" Bob went on, as though apologising for past weaknesses which were not to be repeated, "besides, if I live here, there'll be always some one to look after the office, and you know you arn't always up to time, Sol," he concluded, with his magpie wink.

Mr. Solomon Isaacs, like most of his tribe, was of a convivial turn, and sometimes came to the office late, with a headache, from his villa at Pentonville.

"I have called on you, Bob," said Blisset, one morning, in quite his old manner, "because Lord Hilton thinks that the chek-mek you offered him not long ago was one that I had lost. I suppose you bought it at some pawnbroker's sale?" he added, carelessly.

"No I didn't," replied Bob, "I found it—there!"

"Of course I will give you its value all the same. It was a gift from an old friend now dead. It is engraved with an L in a double diamond, and the box is slightly damaged. Do I describe what you found?"

"And what do you suppose it is worth?" asked Bob, eluding the question.

"Perhaps five pounds, but put your own value on it," said his visitor, carelessly.

"What a swell you are now, eh? Mr.—er—Mr.—"

"Do you affect to forget my name?"

"Some people have more than one name," said Bob, drily.

"Most people have two—a christian and a surname."

"That's just it," said Bob, bursting out into a coarse laugh, "a christian and a *Sir*-name, ha, ha! a *Sir*-name! right, so they have. Why, you'd be a bigger swell still, if you had a *Sir*-name, wouldn't you?"

A cold shudder passed through Blisset as he heard those words, and saw the venomous little eyes fixed on him. Fortunately for him the office-boy entered at the moment, and informed his master that a young gent in a hansom cab wanted to speak to him "particular." No. The young gent wouldn't come in, and couldn't wait. He wanted Mr.

Burridger very particular, and would not keep him a minute.

Mr. Burridger, still chuckling over his joke about the Sir-name, begged to be excused; and no sooner had the door closed behind him, than Blisset's eye fell on a certain greasy black pocket-book, which has figured before in this history, and which lay at the side of the desk at which its owner had been writing. Something—call it instinct, if you like—caused Blisset to seize and open that pocket-book, and the first paper which fell out was his letter to his wife!

He had hardly time to replace it when Burridger returned.

"I see you're busy now," said Blisset, rising. "We can talk about this another time. Will you come and dine with me somewhere?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, what are you going to do with yourself this evening?"

"Stop at home and do my work, I've got to work for my living," said Mr. Burridger.

"Hang it, Bob, don't be so unsociable! Why shouldn't we be friends. I've helped you to a good thing once, and will again."

"So you will," laughed Bob again, "so you will, ha, ha, ha! so you will."

"To be sure! Come, be sociable. What time do you shut up shop?"

"Office hours, nine till five."

"And work at home after that? you're getting on Bob. When I come and see you at home, I shall tell your mother not to let you work so hard."

"No you won't. You won't see mother at my home. A man ain't going to be tied to his mother's apron strings all his life. I've got a home of my own now," said Bob, with pride.

"Here?"

"My chambers are over the office."

"Ho, ho, I see; and rare work you do of an evening I'll be bound, there, you and a lot of rackets young neighbours," said Blisset, trying to banter.

"There ain't no neighbours, and there ain't a quieter street in all London. I tell you I've got business to attend to, so none of your chaff. Now about that thing, what do you call it?"

"A chek-mek."

"You told me it was worth five pounds, but you say I may put my own price upon it."

"If it be really mine, yes."

"Is this your's?" asked Bob, taking the article in question from a drawer in his writing-table.

"It is."

"Well, I want fifty pounds for it," said

he, looking his visitor fixedly in the face.

"I wish you had chosen some other way of enabling me to make you a present, Bob," replied Blisset, after a pause; "but still—you shall have it, give me the chek-mek."

"Give me a cheque for the money," chuckled Bob, "first."

"Certainly." And forthwith he wrote a draft on his bankers for the sum.

"Think twice about it, Bob," he said, buttoning his coat, "and dine with me. Remember what a jolly dinner we had together at Cremorne."

"I tell you I've got work to do."

"Well, I'll come and help you afterwards."

"Thank you, I like to do my work alone."

"*Alone!*" The word echoed in Blisset's ear as he walked along the Strand, and not all the rattle and turmoil of that busy thoroughfare could dispel the sound *Alone*. This man who held his secret, whose manner told him that he was on the point of using it against him—this reptile that he saw coiled ready for his spring would be there at night *alone*.





